



PHYLLIDA: A LIFE DRAMA

FLORENCE MARRYAT

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Please

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PHYLLIDA.

A LIFE DRAMA.

BY

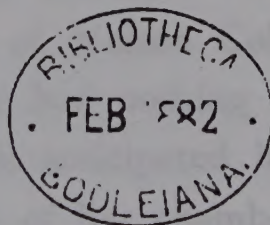
FLORENCE MARRYAT

(MRS FRANCIS LEAN),

AUTHOR OF 'LOVE'S CONFLICT,' 'MY SISTER THE ACTRESS,'
ETC., ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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PHYLLIDA.

CHAPTER I.

PHYLLIDA gazed into the hard, determined face of Nelson Cole, and felt that she had nothing to expect from him. She had anticipated his accusation. In the solitude of her chamber she had imagined that just such a moment might arise when he would turn round and call her by her theatrical name, and she had thought she was fully prepared for the emergency. She had resolved to be so calm

and brave, and to return his look with one of such complete astonishment as to disarm his suspicion, and leave him more puzzled than before. But when the time came, all her resolutions melted into thin air. It is difficult to keep a brave front before the truth. Even murderers, with their lives at stake, are forced by some inward power into confession. So, instead of staring her accuser out of countenance and haughtily demanding if he meant to insult her, Phyllida steadied herself with one hand against the library table, and with white lips faltered,—

‘ You will not betray me ? ’

Even Nelson Cole was staggered by this abrupt surrender. He had been certain of her identity before he placed the packet with her mother’s wedding-ring in her hand ; but he had expected to have somewhat of a fight with her, and to bring her to her knees only through threats of exposure to the world. And when she gazed up at him with tearful, pleading eyes, and made that tremu-

lous prayer for pity, his task became a very hard one. He was a stern, cynical man, and he had a mean opinion of her sex ; but he was not such a stoic as to be able to destroy all the hopes of such a very pretty woman without a pang. He took two or three steps backward in his surprise.

‘ It is yourself, then ? ’ he ejaculated ; ‘ and you confess it ? Upon my soul I can hardly believe that it is true. Although I recognised you in the first hour we met, I can scarcely believe that any woman is capable of such an act of wickedness as this. Stephanie Harcourt, are you lost to all sense of decency, or are you mad ? ’

‘ Oh, Mr Cole, ’ she cried, trembling, ‘ don’t speak to me like this. You were kind to me once before when I was in great trouble and distress, and I have never forgotten it. Don’t turn altogether against me now.’

‘ *Kind to you before,* ’ he repeated in a tone of contempt. ‘ What *were* you before ? ’

Phyllida.

answer me that. Am I to extend the same leniency that I showed to a second-rate actress, discharged for misconduct from the Chicago stage, to the woman I find living at Briarwood as the wife of my friend Bernard Freshfield. How did you come here? What devil sent you to Bluemere? And how dared you impose upon his credulity and trust in you?’

‘He *would* marry me,’ she answered, weeping. ‘I tried—oh, so hard!—to make him see what a bad thing it would be for him, and how much beneath him I was in every way; but he would not listen to anything I said. He declared his life’s happiness was bound up in me, and so I gave myself into his hands to do as he thought best with.’

‘Don’t talk rubbishy sentiment to me,’ said Nelson Cole brusquely. ‘This is a matter that is not to be mended with any humbug of that sort. You know that you are not his wife—that you cannot be—that

you are the wife of that forger in the New York Tombs.'

'Oh no, no!' she cried passionately, clasping her hands together; 'indeed I am not. Cortès died in the Tombs three months ago. I read the news in the *New York Times*; and I know it is true. And it made me so happy—so very, very happy. I began a new life from that day.'

'Dead, is he?—and three months ago. But what difference does that make to you? You were married to Freshfield *six* months ago.'

'I know I was; but surely, sir, you do not suspect I was not free to marry him? I was divorced from Fernan Cortès before I left the States. I have the papers in my possession. I had no difficulty in getting free from a man who was locked up for two years for forgery.'

'Divorced!' said Cole contemptuously; 'pulled through by a Chicago attorney; and when Freshfield does not even believe in

the legality of a divorce in his own country, why, in his eyes, you are no more his wife now than you are mine.'

Her brown eyes dilated with horror.

'What!' she ejaculated. 'He does not believe in it?—he would consider it a farce, a fraud? Oh, Mr Cole, you cannot think I knew that? It is the first moment I have ever suspected such a thing. Do you think I would have dragged him down—*he*, who has been so noble, so generous, so loving, to me—to share such a lot as mine—had I not fully believed the past was done with for ever? Bernard not think me free?—still consider me chained to that dreadful man, and whilst his kisses were on my lips? Oh, my God, how I have been deceived!'

'I should rather say, how poor Freshfield has been deceived!' replied her companion. 'I am afraid to think what he will do when he hears that you have never been his wife.'

‘Oh, don’t say that!’ exclaimed the girl in a voice of pain; ‘don’t think it. If you only knew all the love that has passed between us — the confidence we have exchanged—the delight we have had in each other’s society—the thanks we have given to God for our happiness—you would not say we are not married. What is marriage but an union of hearts and souls—a mutual devotion — a tie that no misfortune nor trouble can unloose? And this is what Bernard and I feel for each other. Believe me, sir, we are true husband and wife. It would kill me to think we could ever be otherwise.’

‘And do you suppose I can let matters go on in this way, then?’ he asked roughly.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean that I came here to find that you have deceived my best friend; that you are still deceiving him; that he has not the slightest knowledge of your antecedents nor your condition, and that if I leave him in

the same deplorable ignorance, I shall prove myself to be his worst enemy.'

'You will not *tell* him?' she screamed; 'you will not tell him of Cortès or my having been on the stage? Oh, Mr Cole, remember *he* is *dead*—he can never rise up to bear witness against me now; and I *am* Bernard's wife; indeed, *indeed* I am!'

'Stephanie Harcourt, if I acceded to your request, I should become *particeps criminis*, and I will not do it. Bernard Freshfield must learn the truth—if not from your lips, from mine.'

'Oh, I cannot, I *cannot* tell him,' she moaned; 'he has loved me so. You do not know how he has loved me.'

'I know that if he has the noble nature with which I credit him, that he will pretty soon *unlove* you when he hears how he has been deceived. To think of your assurance in coming to a place like this, and taking your stand amongst respectable people, and finishing off by marrying a

parson, beats me altogether. I have always known that your sex possess the daring insolence of the devil ; that you will trample on proprieties, and carry your cheateries with a high hand, such as men would shrink from assuming ; but I think your case is worse than any I have ever heard of.'

As he concluded he advanced suddenly, and grasped her again by the arm.

'In the name of evil !' he exclaimed, 'what made you leave America ?'

She did not resent his rudeness. She only deprecated it by falling at his feet.

'Oh, sir,' she cried, weeping bitterly, 'you felt for me once before ; show a little mercy to me now. I came to England with the money you sent me.'

('D—n my folly !' he interposed loudly.)

'I came, only desirous to find honest work, by which to earn my living ; but my cousin, Pinner, invited me take a month's rest at Bluemere first, and here it was I

met him. Oh, sir, you do not know, you cannot tell, the temptation it was to me to let him love me. No starving creature with rich food in sight was ever more sorely tempted to steal what was not his to take. But I tried—indeed I did—to prevent his lowering himself by marrying me. I even asked him to take me as I was instead—a lot like that, with such a man as he is, would have been too good for me. But you know his noble nature. He would do nothing less than what was right in his own eyes, and so he married me; and I thought—I thought—I hoped,’ she went on sobbing, ‘until you came, that, by reason of his love and goodness, I might live to become, some day, not all unworthy of him. Oh, sir, you were my good angel once, and took me away from all that was degrading me, and gave me fresh hopes of life. Don’t undo your work now. Don’t drag me again from the heaven you helped me to attain, back to the misery from which you lifted me.’

Nelson Cole was moved by her appeal. He felt himself uncomfortably moist about the eyes, and there was a husky sensation in his throat, which made it difficult for him to answer her. Yet his mind never wavered from the idea that it had formed of duty. He loved and respected Bernard Freshfield more than he cared to acknowledge even to himself, and he felt that he could not leave him the dupe of a woman, whose antecedents rendered her quite unfit to fill the high position he had placed her in.

So, although he felt very much for Phyllida—more even than he had done for the trembling and shame-stricken girl whom he had visited and succoured in Chicago—he was firm in his resolution that Bernard Freshfield must learn the truth respecting her.

‘You ask me an impossibility,’ he replied. ‘I am very sorry for the disgrace you have brought upon yourself; but you should have told Freshfield everything from the begin-

ning. What right had you to conceal the events of your former life from him ?'

'I know I should have done so. I have suffered for it greatly,' she sobbed, still kneeling at his feet ; 'but I thought there was no chance of its ever being raked up again. I hoped it was buried and done with. I believed that that miserable episode need never be any more to me than a half-forgotten nightmare.'

'You thought, in fact, that neither I nor Miss Vavasour, nor any of your Chicago friends, would ever show their faces in the mother country ! That was not very astute of you, Miss Harcourt. But supposing it had been the case, I think Mr Jack Neville can tell a few stories about a life even prior to the one you were leading when we met ! I conclude you have not quite forgotten that scoundrel Sandie Macpherson, and the Sacramento Valley business, eh ?'

She rose to her feet then, and confronted him with a face in which there

was no visible feeling but that of indignant scorn.

‘I have forgotten nothing—*nothing*,’ she articulated; ‘and above all that, every trouble I have encountered in this life—every sin I have committed—has been at the instigation or command of your sex. And you, too, are determined to hunt me down! I read it in your eye and the tones of your voice. Let it be so, then. I will make no further appeal to your pity or your generosity. Bernard Freshfield shall know the worst that you can tell him.’

‘You will not break the news to him yourself, then? It will be the better for you, perhaps. You women have a thousand little wheedling ways, remember, by which you can induce a man to believe anything you choose, and to forgive everything, even against his calmer judgment! If you will tell the man you call your husband the truth with your own lips, you will probably be able to persuade him to marry you over again.’

‘You have refused me your sympathy, Mr Cole; you might spare me your sarcasm! I am only a woman, you know, and cannot be expected to cope with it. And I would rather that you conveyed the intelligence you speak of to your friend. I don’t think it—it—will make him happier, and there is no need that I should add more than my necessary share to his disappointment.’

As Phyllida pronounced, with some difficulty, the last word, she turned from him, and with drooping figure and bowed head, left the room. Nelson Cole looked after her uneasily.

‘D—n it all!’ he thought. ‘What *am* I to do? I’d give a thousand dollars not to have seen her at all; but having seen her, I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to leave that poor boy in ignorance of her identity! Why, I should be aiding and abetting one of the greatest deceptions I ever heard of. And a parson’s wife, too!’

It beats everything that ever happened to me before. But *I* can't do the job. I must wait a few days and persuade the child to do the right thing herself—she will see on reflection that it *is* right, and will do it from love to him—and then they must slip away quietly somewhere, and be married over again to satisfy his scruples. Hang it all! she is a lovely creature, and I don't wonder at the boy going mad over her. And she's got some good in her too, poor little soul! and after all she is but a woman! Well, well, it's a most unfortunate business, and I wish I could guess how Bernard will take it. But at all risks it must be done.'

And so musing, Nelson Cole, half sorry for Bernard and half sorry for Phyllida, but quite believing that however great a tempest his interference might provoke, the weather would settle down and be fair again after a while, walked round to

the stables, and mounting a horse which Freshfield had ordered to be kept for his use, rode off, wondering how the poor little girl was bearing it all, and by what argument he could best induce her to tell her husband the entire truth. And the 'poor little girl' meanwhile, stunned by the calamity that had overtaken her, was walking up and down her own room and resolving more determinately with every step, that she would die rather than tell it. The events of the last six months, during which she had gradually been learning to believe herself to be prosperous, respectable, and beloved, seemed to have slidden past her like a dissolving view, and she was once more the disgraced and unprotected actress of Chicago, who had broken down in *the* song of the evening, and been ignominiously expelled. She shrank even from her own scrutiny, as in fancy she travelled back to that scene of humiliation, and felt as if all Bluemere

had been witnesses of it, and she heard their voices reviling her for having dared to pollute their thresholds with her presence. She was no longer Mrs Freshfield of Briarwood—that dignity had been stripped from her like a stolen garment—she was Stephanie Harcourt, the burlesque actress, and the widow of a criminal who had died in the Chicago gaol. And she, who was all this and more, had pretended to be the wife of a good and pure and true-hearted man, who had believed in her and trusted her, and endowed her with all his worldly goods, and given her *his* mother and *his* sister to be her's also.

Tell Bernard! Go and look into Bernard's faithful eyes, and tell him she had never been his wife!—that she had seduced him into the commission of a crime that must be abhorrent to his feelings; listen to his reproaches; hear his exclamations of surprise and horror; see his looks of pain!

No, no, she could not do it! she would die first; she would throw herself into the mere, as she had felt prophetically before all this misery came to pass, that it would have been best to do.

And neither could she stay whilst Nelson Cole repeated the story of her disgrace—that would be almost worse than telling it herself, like standing in the next room with bated breath whilst some dreadful operation was being performed upon one's dearest friend, unable to help or comfort, because one had not the courage to look upon his inevitable pain. Phyllida told herself incoherently that she could neither use the knife nor see it used. She felt much the same as Charles the First must have felt when Lord Strafford went to his death, guilty to the last degree of the suffering about to be inflicted, but powerless to avert it, and too great a coward to see it put in execution.

Nelson Cole did not return to Briarwood

till close upon the dinner hour. It was a raw, foggy afternoon, and riding in the dusk was not exhilarating exercise, yet he preferred it to the chance of encountering Phyllida without the presence of Freshfield, and being subjected perhaps to another series of piteous appeals for mercy. He had only time to run up to his bedchamber and change his spattered riding suit before the second dinner-gong sounded, and he descended to the hall, where he met Bernard in evident perturbation.

‘ My dear Cole, I am so annoyed. Fancy, my wife has actually gone out, after all my cautions to her, and in this wretched fog. It is really too bad of my people. She is so good to them they think she is at their beck and call. I suppose some old woman sent up a request for her presence, and the dear child rushed off at once. But I must put a stop to it. I wont have her health sacrificed for the sake of the parish.’

Nelson Cole looked grave, but all he answered was,—

‘It is, indeed, a foggy afternoon. I could hardly see an inch before me as I rode home, and more than once I thought I had lost my way.’

‘Imagine Phyllida being exposed to it,’ continued Bernard, in a voice of injury, as they entered the dining-room together. ‘I do think, Mrs Penfold, you might have prevented your cousin leaving the house in such weather.’

‘Indeed, Mr Freshfield, I am not to blame. I have been in my own room ever since luncheon, and have not even set eyes on Phyllida. I thought she was in the library with Mr Cole, where I believe you left her.’

‘To be sure I did. What did she say to you about it; Cole? Have you no notion where she has gone?’

‘Not the slightest, my dear fellow. Mrs Freshfield and I talked together for per-

haps half-an-hour after you left us, and then she went up (I imagined) to her own room. It was not until I found she had no intention of returning, that I decided to take a ride. She did not honour me with any confidences as to her plans for the afternoon.'

'Well, it is useless saying any more about it,' replied Bernard, with evident annoyance. 'So let us think of our dinner. She is sure to be back before long.'

But the meal that followed was a very silent one. Bernard was fretting at his wife's absence. Nelson Cole, knowing what was in store for his friend, was naturally grave and thoughtful, and Mrs Penfold could hardly be very lively all by herself. So as soon as the dessert appeared, she rose from table and left the two gentlemen to entertain each other. Bernard sat silent for a few moments, then, striking his hand upon the table,—

'I will stop all my wife's visiting and

nursing in the parish from this evening,' he said angrily. 'I knew what it would be if she once began such work. Women can never do things by halves. She will end by sacrificing me and her friends, for her fancied obligations to the poor. She doesn't go into a single cottage after to-night. I don't care for this sort of thing, and I won't stand it.'

'Hullo, my boy!' exclaimed Cole, 'aren't you coming it rather strong? Mrs Freshfield may entertain a different opinion from yours. Women, as you justly say, seldom do things by halves, even to having their own way.'

'Phyllida is not like the rest of her sex,' replied Bernard; 'she is a child for docility and innocence.'

'Are you so sure of that, Freshfield? You always speak of your wife as if she had not an idea of her own; as if she had never lived a life apart from yours; as if, in fact, she were a nonentity. Now

I don't think she is. On the contrary, I find that she has double the amount of experience of most females of her age.'

'Has she been confiding to you the history of her former life, then?' inquired Bernard jealously, knowing that no such confidence had ever been reposed in him.

'We have been speaking of it certainly, and I was surprised to find how far Mrs Freshfield has travelled and how much she has seen. I told her that she must tell the same story to you, and she promised me that she would.'

'It seems strange that my wife should tell you, a perfect stranger, of incidents that she has not considered it worth while to mention to myself. Are you sure she was not "chaffing" you? Phyllida is rather inclined to be mischievous when she finds a good subject to practise on.'

'No, I don't think it was "chaff," Bernard. I believe it was sober earnest. Neither does Mrs Freshfield regard me as

a perfect stranger. We came to the conclusion this afternoon that we knew a good deal about each other—in fact, we are not quite sure that we have not met before.’

‘Well, it’s all high Dutch to me,’ said Bernard pettishly, as he pushed back his chair from the table, and gazed thoughtfully into the fire. He did not relish the idea that his wife—who was so reticent with himself respecting everything in the past—should have been confidential with another man, and became more impatient than ever for Phyllida’s return, that he might elucidate the seeming mystery. Nelson Cole, on the other hand, had made his remarks with the best intentions, hoping by them in some measure to prepare the husband’s mind for the unhappy news that should greet him when he met his wife again. For he had little doubt in his own mind that Phyllida’s absence was due not to her active benevolence, so much as the perturbed state of her mind, and pictured

to himself the unfortunate girl wandering about the plantations or shrubberies in that dense fog, vainly striving to reconcile herself to the inevitable, until he wished he had bitten out his tongue before he had said the words that had driven her from her home. They waited for two or three hours after dinner in vain expectation of her return, and then Bernard, having questioned all the servants, came into his friend's presence with a face the colour of chalk, and announced his intention of searching for his wife in the village.

‘I am getting so alarmed, Cole,’ he articulated with chattering teeth, ‘I hardly know what to do; but to remain at home is impossible. Not a soul in the house saw Phyllida go out, which is very extraordinary, for the messages from the village always reach her through Mrs Garnett the housekeeper. I have ordered my horse, therefore, and am going to ride over to my mother's. If she is not there or at Mrs

Pinner's, I shall search for her in Bluemere, for I cannot allow her to remain out on such a night as this. Will you excuse my leaving you, old fellow? You must know the state of anxiety I am in.'

'Can't I help you, Freshfield? Let me have another horse and ride over to Brick Common. It lies at some distance from Bluemere, does it not?'

'Oh, she never could have been so mad as to go out to the Common on foot, Cole. It is a long way from this, and I doubt if she could walk it. Besides, it is dangerous ground down by the mere, and I would not allow you to traverse it without company. She must be at Blue Mount, though what has taken her there is beyond my comprehension.'

His horse came round as he spoke, and Cole watched him ride off through the fog with a heavy heart. A sudden fear lest the unhappy girl had attempted her own life in the mere had darted through him, and he

felt that in such a case he should hold himself guilty of her death. He turned back into the house with a very grave face, and his spirits were not lightened by Mrs Penfold's melancholy forebodings.

‘Do you think it possible anything can have happened to poor, dear Phyllida, Mr Cole?’ she whimpered. ‘She has been so strange and unlike herself, both yesterday and to-day, that I quite fear the worst. I told you how she rambled last evening, and though I gave her a sleeping draught she talked all night of the most extraordinary things. And now to run away in this unaccountable manner, and without saying a word to anybody. It is really very unusual; and if anything happens to her, poor, dear thing, in consequence, I am sure I shall never get over it.’

‘What do you expect to happen to her,’ returned Cole, in his gruff way, ‘unless it is an attack of bronchitis or influenza? *That*, I should imagine, to be a very likely result

of such an act of imprudence on Mrs Freshfield's part, and the best thing you can do, Mrs Penfold, is to see that everything is prepared ready for your cousin to take a hot bath as soon as ever she returns home.'

'Oh, you are quite right, my dear sir; thank you so much for the suggestion,' replied Mrs Penfold. 'I will go and see to it at once. Of course a hot bath, and just the least drop of brandy and water to take inwardly, that will be the very thing for dear Phyllida, to prevent the injurious effects of the fog.'

She left him to himself as she concluded, and Cole was thankful to be so left, for his anxiety was fast changing into apprehension. He did not employ himself, but sat there eagerly listening for the sound of the horse's hoofs which should bring Bernard back with news of her. They came at last, and as he entered the hall Cole went out to meet him.

'Well, my boy, and where is she?'

‘I can’t find her,’ replied Freshfield moodily, as he stalked into the library; ‘I have inquired at every house in Bluemere, but they have seen nothing of her. She *must* have gone to Brick Common. But it is too bad, too hard of her,’ he continued, leaning his head in his hands; ‘she knows how dear and precious she is to me, and might have guessed the alarm I should feel on her account. Besides, I asked her not to leave the house; you heard me, Cole? I asked her as plainly as I could speak not to venture out in this detestable fog.’

‘I know you did, but I suppose Mrs Freshfield imagined it was her duty to go. Any way, my dear boy, it can’t be helped now, and you must make the best of it. If your wife is at Brick Common, she will be safe enough till the morning, and you had better go to bed and forget this worry in sleep.’

‘She *must* be at Brick Common,’ re-

peated Bernard, 'there is no other place for her to be at; and she will be safe enough until the morning, as you say. And yet I don't think I can sleep, Cole, not being certain where she is, and I'd rather sit up in the library until I can start off to look for her again.'

'Then I shall sit up with you,' said Nelson Cole, and the household being dismissed to their beds, and the horses ordered for seven o'clock the following morning, the friends ensconced themselves in two arm-chairs opposite each other, and prepared to hold a vigil until dawn.





CHAPTER II.

BERNARD FRESHFIELD was naturally very downcast and disinclined to talk; but Nelson Cole told him so many stories of the vigorous life in the New World, that he became deeply interested, and the hours passed more quickly than either had anticipated.

‘That is the sort of life that would suit me,’ exclaimed Bernard, after Cole had been giving him an account of the gold digging in the Sacramento Valley, and described the lawless set of ruffians by which it was conducted. ‘I should enjoy

above all things the freedom and the freshness of such an existence, and I may add, of such a congregation. To do good to such a population would be a real triumph to the worker. The truths of the gospel, where they *did* take root, would fall with such tremendous power on the newly-turned surface of their minds. Such different work from grinding the same tune, day after day and year after year, to children so accustomed to the piping, that they refuse to listen, and far less to dance. Cole, I should like to be a missionary in Sacramento Valley.'

'So you may think, Freshfield, but I fancy you would alter your mind when you had made a trial of it. The specimens *I* have met from Sacramento have not been promising subjects for conversion, I can tell you—murderers, gamblers, ruffians, thieves. There is no description of vice that does not take ready root in that congenial soil—a gold-digging encampment.

I have reason to say so, believe me. Some day I may tell you why.'

Bernard was about to answer, when the wire of the house-bell grated as though the handle had been ineffectually pulled. It was now nearly six o'clock in the morning, and the sickly, dirty looking dawn, which succeeds a winter's night, was trying to struggle through the holes in the shutters.

'Hark! What was that?' said Cole, as they started simultaneously to their feet. A second passed and again the wire grated audibly, whilst the faintest of tinkles sounded from the bell.

'It is Phyllida,' cried Bernard, as he rushed into the hall, followed by his friend, and began hurriedly to undo the fastenings of the door. But when he threw it open there was no Phyllida upon the steps, only the figure of a little lad, not more than eight or ten years old, whose teeth chattered with the cold.

'Who are you, and what do you want?'

exclaimed Freshfield, as he caught sight of him.

‘If you please, sir, I’ve bring’d the letter, and the ledly said as how you’d give me a shillin’ for bringin’ of it, so I didn’t wait longer than I was ’bliged to, cos the ledly says the sooner ye get it the better, so mother tell’d me to run over as soon as ’twas light.’

He fumbled in his dirty pocket as he spoke, and produced a crumpled envelope.

‘Where *is* the lady?’ exclaimed Bernard impatiently, as he seized the epistle. ‘Where do you come from?’

‘I don’t know where she be now; she was a goin’ off in the railway; but *I* come from Westertown.’

‘*Westertown!*’ cried Bernard, staggering backward.

‘Come, Freshfield,’ said Cole, ‘go to the library and read your letter, whilst I settle with the lad. I suppose one can scarcely send him all the way back again without

something to eat, so here's your shilling, my boy, and you can go down to the kitchen and sit there till the servants are about. It won't be long now before they're stirring.'

It took him a minute or two to usher the shivering little wretch to the kitchen premises, and when he reached the library again he unbarred and threw back the shutters in order to give his friend still further time to overcome whatever shock might be contained for him in that letter. But when, at last, he turned to look at Bernard, he was startled at his appearance. The young man was standing by the table, white, rigid and immovable, as if he had been turned to stone, with his eyes fixed upon the paper spread open before him.

'Why, Freshfield, old fellow, what's the matter now?' said Cole cheerfully.

'What does this mean?' demanded the other in a hollow tone.

.

‘What does *what* mean?’

‘This letter—her letter. Read what she says to me.’

Nelson Cole took up the paper, and read the following words :—

‘BERNARD,—By the time this reaches you, your friend will have told you all he knows about me; and you will have learned how much you have been deceived. But oh, my darling, don’t fret about it; I will never disgrace you more. I am going away where you will never hear of me. Only try to forget everything about me, excepting that I loved you very dearly, and had not strength to do what I ought to have done. But indeed, *indeed*, I believed myself to be your wife.

PHYLLIDA.’

‘*What does it mean?*’ again demanded Bernard Freshfield, as Cole came to the end of the letter.

‘It means, my poor boy, that at last she speaks the truth.’

‘The truth!—that paper! Take care what you are saying, Cole; the truth that she disgraced me—that she only believed herself to be my wife. Why, I married her by special licence at Gatehead. She must be mad; you are all mad to imagine such a thing.’

‘Bernard,’ said Nelson Cole steadily, as he laid his hand on that of his friend, ‘there is a great blow in store for you. Bear it like a man.’

‘Who says I shall not? Because I am a parson, do you suppose I am not a man—as good a man as yourself? But she says you know all about her. What can *you* know that she has not told to *me*—her husband?’

‘Unfortunately, a great deal. I wish it were not so. I knew her in Chicago, long before she came to England. I knew her there upon the stage, as a burlesque

actress, and not as a very prudently behaved actress. The first time I met her, Bernard, was under very distressing circumstances; she had just been dismissed from her employment for—for—in fact for intoxication.'

He glanced at the husband's face as he spoke. It looked as though carved in marble. Only the eyes glared like two balls of fire, and the dry lips muttered harshly the words '*Go on.*'

'Why she came to England after that I do not know; but she had no right to have married you, Bernard, without telling you the truth. She was a married woman, who had obtained a divorce from her husband, and six months ago he was alive in the New York gaol.'

'*It's a lie!*' cried the figure by the table; and Bernard Freshfield made a sudden lunge forward, as though he would have struck his friend. The next moment, however, he had fallen backward, striking his head against

the steel fender, and lay on the hearth-rug, silent and immoveable, with the blood oozing from a cut on the forehead.

Nelson Cole ran upstairs for a sponge and cold water, and having secured the door against possible intruders, knelt down beside the poor young husband, and administered to him as tenderly as if he himself had been a woman. So that in a few minutes Bernard Freshfield, ghastly pale and shivering, as though he had an ague, staggered to his feet again, and sank down in an arm-chair.

‘There, dear boy, you are better now,’ said Nelson Cole compassionately; ‘it’s an ugly truth to swallow, Bernard, and no one knows it better than myself; but you must learn to look it in the face, old fellow, and it will be none the easier for turning your head the other way.’

‘It *cannot* be true!’ murmured Freshfield.

‘It *is* true, my son! Unhappily there is

not a doubt upon the subject. A year ago, Phyllida Moss was an actress on the Chicago stage, under the name of Stephanie Harcourt, and the wife of a notorious forger and criminal, called Fernan Cortès, then undergoing his sentence in the Tombs at New York. She tells me that she procured a divorce from Cortès before she left Chicago, and that he died in the Tombs three months ago ; but I am afraid that will not be much consolation to you. A divorce may be obtained in Chicago for the most trivial reason, and in the most irregular fashion. Couples divorce each other there for incompatibility of temper, or, as you see, on account of the husband being arrested, and the evidence of one party only is necessary to the decree. You must perceive, therefore, what an irregular proceeding it must be. When you met Stephanie Harcourt, she was, according to your own ideas on the subject, still the wife of Cortès, and without power to contract another alliance.'

‘It *cannot* be true,’ repeated Bernard, in a confused manner; ‘you must be mistaken. You are thinking of some one else.’

‘Can’t you believe the evidence of her own letter, Freshfield? She only discovered that I had recognised her for certain yesterday afternoon, and her first act is to leave her home. Does not that prove to you that my statement must be correct?’

‘You frightened her, perhaps,’ replied Bernard. ‘She is not strong, and she saw no way of coping with your testimony. I cannot accept a statement that destroys my life, on the evidence of one witness alone.’

‘Will you accept it on the evidence of two?’ rejoined Cole. ‘Jack Neville, who travelled with me from New York, is staying in London. Will you hear what he has to say on the subject?’

‘Who is Jack Neville?’ asked Bernard in a low voice.

‘He is a fellow who has been implicated

in dozens of scrapes, and burned his fingers more than once ; but a sterling good fellow for all that, and one whose word you may trust to the uttermost. I only knew Stephanie Harcourt in Chicago ; 'but he knew her in San Francisco, long before she went upon the stage. Will you come up to town with me and interview Jack with respect to her?'

'How are we to be sure that he will mean my—my— I would say, how can we be certain his description applies to Phyllida? Two women may singularly resemble each other.'

'True. Take up her photograph, then, and show it to Jack yourself. I see you have a very beautiful coloured portrait of her in the drawing-room, taken in white satin and pearls. She is hardly likely to have worn white satin and pearls in Sacramento Valley. I think if you show that to Neville, and he recognises it, notwithstanding its surroundings, to be the same woman

he knew in 'Frisco, you may be satisfied also as to its identity with Stephanie Harcourt.'

Bernard did not reply, but moved unsteadily towards the door.

'Where are you going, dear boy?' asked Cole.

'To London—didn't you say so?—to see this Jack Neville.'

'But you won't start without your breakfast surely? You can't do it, Bernard. You will drop before you reach Westertown. You don't know what a scarecrow you look.'

'Do you suppose I can eat or drink till I have satisfied my mind upon this subject? Oh, Cole, I am in hell—a raging, burning, intolerable hell! For God's sake, let me do *something*, be it only to walk along the road to Westertown, or I shall destroy myself—or you!'

'We will start as soon as it is possible to put the horses into the carriage,' replied Cole soothingly. 'I am ready to go with

you, Bernard, to the end of the world, only you don't want all the servants and that old woman, Mrs Penfold, to guess your business before it is concluded, do you, old fellow? You wouldn't like to think they were running open-mouthed about the village retailing it to each boor they met, and making it out worse than it need be,—eh?'

The instinctive horror of men, and especially Englishmen, to have their private affairs discussed by a party of busybodies had the desired effect, and Bernard Freshfield sank back in his chair hopeless, but resigned to follow his friend's advice.

'Let me have brandy,' he articulated faintly, 'and leave me alone. Don't let any prying fool come in here, Cole, for pity's sake! and make all the necessary arrangements—there's a good fellow; and tell—tell them what story you like—only let us be off as soon as possible; for this suspense is killing me.'

It was a difficult task which Bernard had

delegated to him ; but Nelson Cole accomplished it as diplomatically as was possible. He told the servants that Mrs Freshfield had received an urgent summons to the death-bed of a friend, and that their master was starting at once to join her. He saw that they were not taken in by the deception, but it left them, at least, nothing but conjecture to feed upon.

With Mrs Penfold he was compelled to be more explicit. She would naturally have demanded to hear the names of people and places—perhaps even have insisted on sharing the search they were about to make for her cousin ; therefore he confided to her the fact that Phyllida's departure was wrapt in mystery, and that, for her sister's sake and her own, it would be prudent to adopt the fable he had invented for the benefit of the servants' hall.

But even as he advised her, he had little hope of her adhering to his counsel. The old lady's face twitched with curiosity and

the delight of a mystery ; and he felt that as soon as their backs were turned, her tongue would itch until she had confided it to some one else.

Yet, after all, he thought to himself, what did it matter ? There was no doubt in his own mind as to the identity of Phyllida Moss ; and all the world of Bluemere must know her story before long. It was for Bernard alone that his heart bled. The women might fight it out between themselves ; he thought only of his ' monkish-faced boy,' and how best to shield him from the scandal and trouble that had come down upon him.

As soon as the hour arrived, he got him as quickly into the carriage as he could, and drove him with his own hands to Westertown ; thence to London, and to the rooms in the Strand temporarily occupied by Mr Jack Neville, was, comparatively speaking, easy work. For many broken hearts and blasted hopes go travelling about the world,

and pursuing their usual avocations, as though nothing were the matter with them, to render the presence of one silent and abstracted man in a railway carriage any matter for curiosity to the rest of the passengers.

They found Mr Jack at home, doing the *dolce far niente* after a night of debauch—careless, handsome, and *insouciant*, as if he were still in San Francisco—and lying on two chairs with a pipe in his mouth.

‘Wake up, Jack, my boy!’ was Cole’s first salutation to him. ‘My friend here, Bernard Freshfield, and I have come up to town on an unpleasant business, and we want your assistance.’

‘What is it?’ cried Jack, suddenly becoming animated; ‘disagreeable, eh? sorry to hear it. Is it a robbery, or a forgery, or an arrest? Any way, I’m at your service.’

‘I knew that before you said it, old chap. It’s something worse than all three put together, Jack. It’s a woman!’

Jack whistled, but made no further remark, except asking them if they had lunched, or if they wouldn't sit down.

'Well, we can talk as well sitting as standing,' replied Cole, taking a chair; 'but my friend, here, is rather anxious to see this business concluded, and so, to tell the truth, am I. And now, Freshfield, I think you'd better open fire by producing that photograph. I wish Jack to take it from your hands rather than mine.'

Bernard, with a face that had assumed a stern rather than a sad expression, now that he was under the scrutiny of a stranger, produced a parcel which he was carrying, and which, being untied, revealed an exquisitely painted photograph of the woman he had called his wife. He placed it in silence before Neville.

'Tell us who that is, Jack?' said Nelson Cole.

Jack looked at the portrait a moment, then clapped his hand upon his thigh.

‘By George! it’s herself!’ he exclaimed. ‘How did you get this? Where was it taken? I wish I had a cool thou. laid on the chances of my picking out her face from that of any other woman in the world. She was always a little stunner; and, by Jove! how handsome she’s grown, and what a swell she looks! Rather different from her appearance after that last night in Chicago—eh, Cole?’

‘Don’t talk rubbish,’ cried the other, impatiently. ‘I asked you to tell me whose portrait it is.’

‘Get out!’ returned Jack; ‘you know as well as I do. It’s little Nessie Macpherson, of Sacramento Valley.’

‘That—that isn’t the name you mentioned,’ said Bernard hurriedly, to Nelson Cole.

‘No, it isn’t; but it will lead to it. Tell us where you met Nessie, Jack, and where she went to, and all you may know about her; not for *my* satisfaction,

you understand, but for that of my friend.'

'Oh, certainly, with the greatest pleasure!' replied Jack, pushing the portrait away from him. 'Only look here!—she hasn't got into a scrape, has she? You're not going to ask me to peach upon a woman?'

'Don't be afraid of that. She *has* got into a scrape (or rather she's got my friend into one); but it's nothing in which the truth can hurt her. So fire away, Jack, and be quick about it.'

The three men drew their chairs together, Bernard sitting between the others, like the ghost of Banquo at the feast of Macbeth.

'I met Nessie first in San Francisco,' commenced Neville. 'I tried my luck at the gold diggings there, and her father, Macpherson, who is one of the greatest rascals living'—('The very greatest, d—n him!' interposed Cole)—'kept a sort of

public house there, which was, in point of fact, a gambling hell, and Nessie used to serve at the bar. I think I noticed her more because she was so young—only sixteen—to place in such a position than because she was so pretty. And Sandie Macpherson ill-treated her into the bargain. There wasn't a digger in the Valley that didn't feel for the child.'

Freshfield groaned, but he said nothing.

'Go on; cut it short,' was the practical remark of Cole.

'I got into a scrape up there after a while—one of my numerous awkward jobs, you know, Cole—and had to run down South till the breeze had blown over. There was a nasty fellow there at the time, called Fernan Cortés, whom none of us liked, and he was implicated in the affair; in fact, I had had to bear the brunt of his knavery. Naturally, the first thing I did on my return was to look up my friend to have it out with him, but I found he had mizzled

from Sacramento Valley, and taken Nessie Macpherson with him. The father declared she was an obstinate hussy, and *would* marry Cortés; but I heard a very different story from the diggers. They told me there had been a fight up at Macpherson's one day with a stranger, who declared he had been cheated at the tables, and that Sandie had held him down whilst Cortés knived him, and Nessie had been witness to the affair, and threatened to expose it. So then her father forced her to marry this Cortés—they can do anything they choose with a rough disorderly band like that—and packed her off with him, lest she should turn witness against them. I'm not sure if that's the real truth of the matter. I only tell it you as it was told to me.'

'But where did you meet Nessie next, Jack? That's the most important thing.'

'Why, in Chicago, where she was acting on the stage under the name of Stephanie Harcourt.'

‘You hear that, old fellow,’ said Cole to Bernard; ‘am I right or wrong?’

‘Let Mr Neville go on, Cole. I have no hope left.’

‘I had just come from New York then, having made the Valley a bit too hot to hold me again, and Fernan Cortés was arrested for forgery whilst I was there, and condemned to two years’ imprisonment in the Tombs. I inquired after his wife in the city, but I couldn’t hear anything of her, so I was all the more surprised to recognise her pretty face on the Chicago stage. Of course I found out her address—I wish to goodness now that I hadn’t—and went off to carry her the news of her husband’s arrest. I never saw a poor girl so delighted in my life; it was as if she had been condemned to death, and I had been the bearer of a free pardon. She went right off her head, and was like a mad creature. Then I was fool enough to give her a dinner at one of the swell restaurants

there, and ply her with champagne—without any idea, of course, except that of keeping up her spirits, but it proved too much for her, and she was dismissed from the theatre that evening. I daresay Cole has told you that part of the story, Mr Freshfield, and I need not recapitulate. Nessie left Chicago, and I have heard nothing of her since, until you placed her portrait in my hand. And what the dickens is she doing now?’

‘Worse than she ever did in all her life before, Neville. We owe you some explanation after giving you all this trouble, and I know you may be trusted with my my friend’s secret. I knew this girl under the name of Stephanie Harcourt at Chicago. I felt interested in her, as I suppose most men would do if only on account of her beauty, and when Evans dismissed her from the theatre I visited her, and sent her sufficient money to enable her to leave the city. What was my astonishment, on going to see my friend Freshfield the other day

at Bluemere—a clergyman, and a man of property and standing in the county—you won't credit me, Jack, but it's sacred truth I'm telling you—what was my amazement at finding that girl established at Briarwood *as his wife.*'

'Heaven and earth!' cried Neville, starting from his seat. 'What! Nessie Macpherson, the daughter of old Sandie, a parson's wife? It's impossible.'

'It *is* possible, my boy, and if I had died in America, she would have probably gone on to the end without detection. But I recognised her at once, and when she found it was the case, she cut and run.'

'Best thing she could do,' remarked Jack sententiously; 'she's a nice little thing, but as for sticking up to be any man's *wife*, and a parson's above all men—O Lord—'

'*Don't,*' ejaculated Bernard in a voice of pain; and then he added in a very gentle but manly manner, 'Mr Neville, I daresay I must appear to you in the light only of

a very easily taken in fool; but you must remember that this—this lady came to Bluemere under a feigned name to stay with respectable people, and I had no means of ascertaining her antecedents. I—I—loved her and believed in her. Tell me all therefore that it is necessary I should know; but don't say more, at least till I am gone, for I am scarcely strong enough yet to bear it.'

There was such bitter unmistakable suffering imprinted on his features that the best part of Jack Neville's nature was aroused. He held out his hand to Bernard, with a firm friendly grasp,—

'I was thoughtless,' he said, 'and I beg your pardon. That you have been easily deceived by her, Mr Freshfield, is no blot upon your character, it rather redounds to your credit. I wouldn't give you twopence for the man whom a pretty woman can't take in. But I think now I have told you all that I can about the girl whose portrait

this is, and who is without doubt the same that I knew under the names of Nessie Macpherson and Stephanie Harcourt. And what shall you do now about it?’

‘She has left me. I do not believe her to be my wife. There is nothing left for me to do except to bear it as best I may,’ said Bernard, in a broken voice.

‘Shall you return to Bluemere?’ demanded Nelson Cole.

‘Certainly; because I have suffered a terrible shock is no reason that my people should suffer also. My duty lies in Bluemere. I had better return at once. And I carry one consolation with me, my conscience is at rest; I have not wronged her.’

‘I had better return with you, Bernard,’ said Cole anxiously.

‘As you will, dear old chum; but it is not necessary—in fact I would rather go alone. I must learn to fight with this

grief that has come so suddenly upon me, and which is far worse than death. After a while, perhaps, if I hear nothing, I will ask you to make some inquiries for me. She must not want, you know; but for the present, I feel stunned and unable to think. Let me go home at once, Cole; I am like a wounded animal, that wants to get out of the light and die alone.'

'All right, Bernard,' replied Cole, 'you shall do exactly as you think best. After a few days you shall be better able to decide for yourself. For the present I will remain with Neville. To-morrow or next day, if you wish it, I will rejoin you at Briarwood, for I shouldn't like to leave England again, dear boy, without another shake of the hand from you. And keep up your pluck, old fellow. Remember there are as good fish in the sea as any that came out of it.'

Bernard shook his head with a sad smile; but he bade them farewell grate-

fully, and walked downstairs again as miserable a man as existed in all England.

His friends talked very differently of Miss Stephanie Harcourt as soon as his back was turned.

‘Fine fellow that,’ commenced Jack Neville. ‘I like his cut. He’s straight as a rule. I can read it in his eye.’

‘You’d say so if you knew him,’ replied Cole. ‘His only fault is being a parson. That man would as soon shoot his own mother as do a mean or dishonourable action. But how he can have been so green as to be taken in by that little jade beats me altogether.’

‘Nessie’s awfully pretty,’ remonstrated his companion, ‘and when she’s well dressed, she looks a thorough lady. Not that I often saw her in San ‘Frisco.’

‘Jack, my boy, I never knew, till I heard you tell the fact to Freshfield, that you had been such a long time in Sacra-

mento. You must have known that old devil Sandie Macpherson for several years. Did you ever see or hear of a person named Summers, who was connected with him there?’

‘Summers! Summers!’ said Jack reflectively. ‘Let me see. Do you mean a man?’

‘No—a woman!’

‘Young?’

‘No,’ replied Nelson Cole, as curtly as before, ‘middle-aged.’

‘Why do you want to know?’

‘What’s that to you, my son?’

‘True. However, I don’t remember the name. I knew a lot of women there, but I can’t recall any one of the name of Summers.’

Nelson Cole smoked in silence for a few minutes as though he were making up his mind to some mighty effort—then he said suddenly,—

‘Jack, had Macpherson (curse him)

any one living with him whilst you were there?’

‘He had his wife,’ replied Neville innocently. But he was startled by the tornado of passion his words roused in his companion.

‘*Wife!*’ he exclaimed vehemently, dashing his pipe upon the ground; ‘he had no wife. He lied if he said so. The woman who lived with him was only another of his victims, and rather a more wronged and helpless victim than the rest. Macpherson stole her—the cowardly scoundrel—as he stole the money of men and their reputations and their lives.’

‘My dear Cole, don’t put yourself into such a white heat on the matter. What was the woman to you? Did you know her?’

Cole paused to wipe the beads of perspiration from his forehead before he answered,—

‘Yes, I did know her—years and years.

ago, and I knew her husband too, poor devil—and what he suffered when she left him, and I have sworn that, whenever Sandie Macpherson and I meet face to face, I will avenge his wrongs. She was a good and true wife to him, Jack (to my friend, you understand), until she met that devil Macpherson, and he led her astray—the arch fiend alone knows by what means—for he is one of the ugliest dogs that was ever created.’

‘You may well say that, Cole. He can never have been handsome at any time, with his freckled face and red hair, and what he used to look like in a digger’s costume with a beard to his waist, you may just imagine. He always went by the name of Sandie the Devil amongst the diggers, and well he deserved it. But this woman you speak of. Can it have been Mrs Moss?’

‘*Moss*—Moss; that is a coincidence, Jack. Stephanie Harcourt went by the

name of Phyllida Moss when she came to England! It was under that name she married poor Freshfield.'

'Was it? Well, I conclude she took the idea from her mother.'

'Was Mrs Moss the mother of Stephanie?' asked Cole, with visible agitation.

'I have been always told so. But she is dead, as perhaps you know. She died when Nessie was fourteen or fifteen—about a year before this iniquitous marriage was brought about with that brute Cortès.'

'She is dead, is she?' said Cole slowly. 'Well, if she was the woman I mean, I am glad to hear it. Dead! escaped from his clutches—gone to a more merciful gaoler. Thank Heaven for her release! Poor Agnes.'

'That was her name, I know,' interposed Neville. 'I have heard Macpherson call her by the name of Agnes over and over again.'

‘And what was she like, Jack?’ said Cole eagerly; ‘describe her to me as well as you can. Let me be sure that it is my—my—poor friend’s wife that lies at rest at last.’

‘She was a tall, slight woman—if you are speaking of Mrs Moss—with dark eyes and hair—’

‘Yes, yes; go on, my lad, go on!’ cried the other hastily.

‘A great quantity of hair that fell down to her waist, and small hands and feet; and a French accent, and—’

‘It was she, without doubt; it was poor Agnes whom you knew. But why did she call herself Moss instead of Macpherson?’

‘That I cannot tell you. I thought perhaps it was because Macpherson himself was in such evil odour in California, and so often in scrapes, that she preferred—like some American women—to keep her maiden name; and it is quite certain

that Nessie was never styled Macpherson till after her mother's death. You see Mrs Moss was a sort of protection to the girl; but when she was removed, Sandie had her entirely in his power, and a nice use he made of it.'

'Did he ill-treat her?'

'Shamefully. The whole Valley was up in arms about it. For my part, I was not surprised to hear she had run off with Cortès; I should not have been surprised to hear anything of the girl, she suffered so much from his violence.'

'Poor child! Well, it will only add another knot to the lash I have in store for that gentleman. It is quite in accordance with the character I have heard of him that he should ill-treat his own child. I confess, Neville, that when I met you after that business in Chicago, and found that I had been assisting the daughter of my greatest enemy, I was sorry for it, and the knowledge of whose child she is made

me sterner perhaps with her the other day than I need have been ; but now that you tell me she is only another of his victims, I will try and forget she is his flesh and blood.'

' But, my dear fellow, I don't know that she is. The general belief in Sacramento was that Nessie was *not* Macpherson's daughter.'

'What do you mean, Neville?' cried Nelson Cole, starting to his feet; 'not *his* daughter? Then, whose daughter could she be? Was not this Mrs Moss her mother?'

'Oh yes; there is no doubt of that; but I imagined—I may be wrong, you know, but this was the general idea—that Mrs Moss had been married twice, and that Nessie was her child by the first marriage. Any way, she was several weeks old, I believe, when Macpherson brought the woman he called his wife to Sacramento; and I have been told by those

who knew him then that he constantly disclaimed all relationship with Nessie. Now that you tell me that Mrs Moss was seduced from her husband by Sandie, the thing is clear enough—Nessie must be the daughter of the man she “deserted.”’

‘God in heaven!’ cried Cole. ‘Why did this never strike me before?’

‘I wonder it didn’t strike Mrs Moss’s husband,’ said Jack.

‘Because, my dear boy, he had left his wife six months before in New York, whilst he went down South on business. And during his absence that reptile Macpherson used some of his diabolical arts by which to convince Agnes Summers that her husband was untrue to her, and she succumbed (as too many women do)—not to her passion, but to her desire of retaliation. And so her husband lost her; and so he has gone through the world since, waiting, but longing, for his revenge. And you really

think that this girl is the child of—of—my friend?’

‘I think it is very probable; I am sure the mother thought so, though she brought up Nessie to look upon Macpherson as her father; but perhaps that was to avoid trouble after her death, for she was a long time dying.’

‘Poor Agnes!’ murmured Cole thoughtfully, as he remembered the worn wedding-ring and the curious fashion in which it had reached him.’

‘Cole, did you say you were only waiting to meet Sandie Macpherson face to face?’

‘It’s true, my boy. I’ve tracked him from one State to another, but always missed him by a flash of lightning. He knows we have a heavy account to settle with each other, and slips through my fingers like an eel. But the day will come, Jack; sooner or later it must come.’

‘Perhaps it *has* come, Cole, for Sandie

the Devil is in England. I saw his ugly face—clean shorn, but still his own—only last night.'

'Where? where?' cried Cole, roused into sudden activity.

'He was pushing through a crowd when I caught sight of him, and I didn't attract his notice, as you may suppose. That man is my evil genius, and misfortune has always followed in his wake for me. So I didn't stop to shake his dirty hand. But he is in London, safe and sure.'

'Neville, I can't return on the 10th. This matter must be settled before I leave England. The sleepers start by the *King of the Icebergs*, and I shall telegraph to Farquharson at once that business detains me here for an indefinite period.'

'Will it be wise, Cole, to let your friend's private affairs interfere with your relations with Farquharson?'

'My connection with the firm, my annual income, and every prospect I have in life,

may go smash before I will give up this opportunity of settling old scores with that scoundrel. Neville, you don't know—it is impossible to tell you—the bad blood that is between us!’

‘I know one thing,’ replied the younger man, laughing, ‘that you are determined to have a slap at the old hypocrite, and I wish you all success. If I could help you to smash him I should be but too glad.’

‘They don't allow Lynch law in this country,’ said Cole; ‘but they'll have to stand it for once in a way if Sandie Macpherson and I cross each other's path, and they may give me six months afterwards if they will, but I'll have my revenge on him. It would be cheap at any cost.’

And then having made some appointment with his friend for the evening, Nelson Cole took his way slowly downstairs with a mouth that looked as determined as a bulldog's, and an eye that gleamed with the softness of a woman's. The one was for

Sandie Macpherson, the other for Phyllida Moss.

‘Poor child!’ he thought, ‘poor ill-used child! At any rate she is *her*’s, and from this time forward I will stand her friend.’





CHAPTER III.

HOW Bernard Freshfield reached home that day, he said afterwards that he never knew. It is supposed that he travelled by cabs and trains in the same way that happy mortals (if there are any) perform their journeys ; but it was all done mechanically, and he was conscious but of one thought the while, that he was alive, and he wished that he could die. He was a good man ; but it was too soon for him to become reconciled to such an awful disappointment—the worst that had ever befallen him. He could not realise that it was true—that would have been impossible

—but he kept on repeating mentally the intelligence that had been conveyed to him by Jack Neville and Nelson Cole, and wondering in a dull, stupefied way if they could be mistaken, and resolving that he would tax his wife with it, face to face, and then, waking up with a start, to remember that she was *not* his wife, and that she was gone.

Briarwood without Phyllida! It was incredible — it would never look like the same place again—but then that was a trifle compared to the rest; *the world* would never look the same to him again, it was puerile fretting about Briarwood. As he walked home from Westertown (for he felt that when he *could* use action it was the only preservative against his going mad), he could not help comparing his feelings with those he experienced on losing his first wife. He had been very lonely then; the house had seemed like an empty mausoleum to him, and he had never entered the hall for

months afterwards, and encountered the stairs without recalling how he had watched the bearers carry Alice's coffin from her bedroom to the library, and had removed the lid to take one more look at her pale waxen face before it was hid away from him for ever. He had not loved her as he *could* love, but she had endeared herself to him, and no man can lose the woman who has been part of his life, without the loss being succeeded by a terrible sense of loneliness. But with the loneliness, however hard to bear, come rest, solitude, and silence—three strong friends to help us to cope with sorrow. In his present position, Bernard could have no such assistance, and he felt as if the first he should never know again, and the other two he could not bear. *If* she had only died, he kept on saying to himself—meaning Phyllida, of course—died with her hand in his, true and loving to the last, like his poor, forgotten Alice, he could have struggled with misfortune. But to think of her living still,

though lost to him—the wife perhaps of some other man (since their union was proved to have been illegal), the thought was madness—he could not—dare not, think.

There were his people waiting for his return ; his work amongst them to be punctually performed. As he strode on through the gathering darkness (for it was late in the afternoon) he told himself there was but one way in which to meet the storm that had overtaken him, and that was by work—hard, constant, faithful work—and he would try no other remedy. He had been careless, perhaps. The charm of this woman's society and ways and manners had kept him too much by her side, and caused him to neglect his humbler friends. He had provoked the Almighty to send forth His thunders and lightnings upon him. In the freshness of his grief Bernard Freshfield forgot the heart and essence of the religion to which he had ever clung ; he overlooked the 'All-loving,' who had been to him as

an actual fatherly presence, and called Him the Almighty instead. How much some women will have to answer for hereafter—the *charming* women especially, who hold the power of drawing men after them and detaining them there. A woman has but too often come between a good man and his God before Bernard Freshfield's time. But his nature was too noble to succumb utterly to such weakness. As he entered the grounds of Briarwood it struck him, for the first time, that he should have to give some explanation of the disappearance of Phyllida to his friends and servants. He had been too much absorbed in his own grief to think of it, and even now it troubled him but little compared with all the rest. After all, what was the shame, compared with the loss? Only he must spare her name as much as he possibly could. He let himself into the house, and walked into the library. The lamps were burning brightly, the fire had been well tended; it was evident

that his servants had expected him home again. He rung the bell for Mrs Garnett twice. That was his accustomed signal that he required her services, and he felt in his present state of mind that he could better encounter a woman than a man. The old housekeeper appeared, prim and spotless as usual, and without a sign of disturbance on her countenance.

‘I am glad to see you home, sir; I was beginning to feel uneasy. The days do close in so soon now. I suppose you will take your dinner at seven as usual?’

‘Yes—no—’ replied Bernard incoherently. ‘Dinner, oh yes, of course I will. I mustn’t forget Mrs Penfold. By the way, that’s what I wanted, Mrs Garnett. Please ask Mrs Penfold to come and speak to me here.’

‘But, if you please, sir, she’s gone!’

‘Gone! Where to?’

‘I understood she had gone to stay with Mrs Pinner, sir; at least she packed up her

box and left word for the stable boy to take it over there on a barrer. Mrs Penfold was very curious like and upset in her mind all the morning, sir. She kept on saying that she'd better go, and that you wouldn't like to see her here when you returned, and I thought, perhaps, there had been a sort of misunderstanding between you. But it wasn't my place to say anything, sir, so I just let her go.'

'She must do as she thinks best,' replied Bernard indifferently, 'though there is no reason why she should not have remained at Briarwood. Any news from the village, Mrs Garnett?' he added with a sigh.

'Well, yes, sir. As I was just saying to Edwards, they've been coming and going all day like a hive of bees. But it was the mistress they was after, and it was no use my telling them she wouldn't be home to-night. Old William Bennett has the rheumatics very bad, and wanted some of that famous liniment; but you see, sir, I hadn't

the mistress's keys to get it. Then Mrs Sutton was taken ill, and sent up for her. As if she could be at all the labours in the village, as I told 'em. This evening, not half-an-hour ago, up comes John Wright to ask if she could step down to his little Katie, who had scalded her foot with upsetting the tea-kettle, and she kept on screaming out for Mrs Freshfield. I sent them down a roll of cotton wool, and said that would do the child more good than the mistress, even if she had been to home. They think they can't do anything without her now, sir. It's here, there, and everywhere, they want her just for all the world as if she was their slave.'

'Poor creatures! poor creatures!' groaned Bernard, as he thought how his loss would reflect on so many. His manner alarmed the housekeeper.

'I hope there's nothing wrong, sir?' she said respectfully. 'Me and Edwards have been quite in a quandary all day, what with

the mistress going away so suddenly, and you too.'

She was an old servant, who had served his family faithfully for many years, and he tried to tell her of his trouble, but broke down utterly in the attempt.

'There *is* something wrong,' he gasped, 'but don't speak to me of it yet, for I cannot bear it. Only do this for me, Garnett. You and Edwards have been more than servants to me; be my friends in this predicament, and try to hold your tongues. I—I—don't quite think she will return,—not just yet, I mean,—but you shall know all about it by-and-by. And don't worry me with dinner. Only leave me alone and undisturbed, and make the best of it you can downstairs.'

The old woman curtsied to him and instantly withdrew. She had suspected the worst from the drift of Mrs Penfold's lamentations, and the alacrity with which that lady had removed herself and her belongings from Briarwood. But the uneducated, how-

ever well-intentioned, can never leave a mystery to *be* a mystery. They must supplement it with speculations of their own. Edwards and Garnett had already decided that as no one knew *why* Mrs Bernard Freshfield had left her home, it was quite evident she did not go alone, and visions of mustachioed rakes, with gold-braided uniforms and swords clanking by their sides, had been floating through their minds all day. It was not the slightest obstacle to their imagination that no officers had been seen in Blue-mere or its vicinity since their master's marriage.

'I always did *hate* them milling-tary,' Mrs Garnett had ejaculated, as they discussed the subject together. 'I might have been married to a soldier myself; but I thank the Lord I wasn't; for I've heard since as they're the ficklest and poorest and most trumperious lot. Poor Garnett always maintained so.'

And after her interview with Bernard in

the library, she was still more certain that a 'nasty soldier' must be at the bottom of his undisguised misery, though she and Edwards were both too faithful to his interests to do more than whisper their suspicions in each other's ear. In the servants' hall they declared—and, let us hope, were forgiven for the pious lie—that the master had been with the mistress all day; but as she was nursing her own aunt by the father's side, and the complaint was not infectious, he had given his leave for her to stay away as long as she was required.

'And I'm afraid it will be some time before we see the mistress back again,' added Mrs Garnett (not content with having told a lie and done with it); 'for *I* know what her poor, dear aunt lies ill of, and it's a disease as will never rest till it's carried her off. And how I'm to satisfy all these poor people as come hollering after the mistress, whilst she's away, the Lord only knows. But if any of you jades go to dis-

turb the master in the libbery or elsewhere,' cried Mrs Garnett, with a sudden change of manner, 'you'll lose your places. He's got more than enough to think of and manage, poor, dear gentleman, with the whole parish visiting thrown on his hands. So you mind what I say,' and keep down here in your proper places, or it will be the worse for you.'

Meanwhile Bernard remained in the library, in silent torture, with his face buried in his hands, trying to disentangle the confused thoughts that tripped each other up as they rushed helter-skelter through his brain; to reduce the chaos into order—to remember exactly *what* had happened to him, and to decide what influence it would exert upon his future. He had one especially hard task before him—to tell the truth to his mother. He felt he must tell it; that it was due to her and to Laura that they should hear of the disgrace that had fallen on the family, through his means, from his

own lips. He did not know how much or how little of the news had already circulated through Bluemere. Mrs Penfold's sudden departure seemed as though she was aware of it; it would never do for it to reach Blue Mount by a stranger's hand. He pulled out pen and paper at once, and wrote hurriedly; but his letter was addressed not to Mrs Freshfield,—but to Laura.

‘MY DEAREST SISTER,—A terrible blow has fallen upon me, which you must not hear from any one but myself. Phyllida has left me. She was never my wife. She was a married woman when she came to England, and Cole (who knew her in America) recognised her directly they met. Break this news to my poor mother as gently as you can, and talk about it as little as possible. And whatever you do, don't come to Briarwood, for I cannot speak on this subject nor see any one,

at all events for the present.—Ever your
affectionate brother,
BERNARD.'

He sealed his letter and dispatched it by a groom, and then he went up to the chamber which Phyllida had occupied and locked himself in, and spent the night amidst the relics of his lost love, with which it was strewn. She had taken nothing away with her apparently, except the plain serge dress she wore. All the costly fabrics he had taken such delight in purchasing for her—the delicate silks and satins; the sable trimmed and velvet mantles; the lace and jewellery that had excited the indignation of her mother-in-law—were all there. She had left them behind her seemingly with the utmost indifference, and gone forth into the fog and the darkness, unprovided and alone. Even her purse containing the money with which he supplied her for the parish needs—('Judas's bag,' as the poor child had laugh-

ingly called it)—lay on the toilet table, and Bernard took it up mechanically and counted the contents. A five-pound note, two sovereigns, and seven shillings in silver. What had Phyllida taken with her? he thought in a dazed manner; by what means did she intend to provide for herself in the future? But even such speculations did not cause any feelings of tenderness or compassion towards her. His whole heart was hardened by the blow it had received; he would not remember that she had been the wife of his bosom; he thought of her only as the woman who had deceived him and brought him to shame, who had been deceiving all her life (so his curdled nature was ready to believe), and who would go on deceiving till she died. He was rough even with the poor things she had left behind her, and kicked such as lay in his way to one side with his foot—a very different mode of procedure to the tender-

ness with which he had handled the reminiscences of the dead girl whom he had never loved with one tithe of the passion which was even then raging in his breast. Violent emotions must have their violent counterparts. The deceived lover who can bless and pardon, has ceased to regret the infidelity he so readily condones, and a woman need never desire a better compliment from an old admirer than when he refuses to meet her altogether. She may rely that he feels himself too weak to bear her presence, or too strong: too full of regret for the past, or too angry with the present. When lovers become friends, the passion of love has expended itself. Had Phyllida entered Bernard's presence at that moment, he might have killed her.

Meanwhile, it is impossible to describe the consternation with which his news was received at Blue Mount. Had he written to say that Phyllida had dropped down

dead, it could not have surprised and shocked poor Laura more. She had grown so fond of her sister-in-law, they had become so confidential and friendly together, and read so much of each other's hearts and minds, that the revelation was as ghastly as though she had been told that her mother, whom she honoured above all women, had led a life of iniquity and sin.

Phyllida already married, and not to Bernard! Living at Briarwood, and making every one so happy there, and showing such a bright, sweet example to all who went to her for comfort or advice, and yet *not* Bernard's wife—the wife of some other man! Oh, it was incredible—*it could not be!* Bernie's mind must have been led astray by some diabolical arts; his friend Nelson Cole must be mistaken, or mad—or—or—anything, sooner than she could credit that Phyllida was not as good and pure as she seemed.

The dear, brave girl read her painful letter and kept the secret, hugging it to her breast as the Spartan boy concealed the fox that preyed upon his vitals—taking it out in the night, and perusing the horrible sentences it contained again and again, but still remaining steadfast to her first idea—that the thing was impossible.

She did not heed Bernard's injunction that he would not be disturbed either by her mother or herself, but slipped out of the house as soon as breakfast was over the following morning, and made her way to Briarwood without breathing a word of her intention to Mrs Freshfield. She opened the hall-door (doors are generally kept upon the latch in country places), and without ceremony entered the library. There sat her brother at his writing-table, pale, hollow-eyed, and stern, but still occupied just as usual with his parish papers. His greeting to Laura was not a genial one,—

‘I thought I desired you not to come here,’ he said gravely.

‘I know you did, dear, dear Bernie; but how do you suppose I could obey such an order? I received your note—I need not tell you that; but I have not said a word about it to mamma.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t believe what you wrote to me: because I think you must be labouring under some terrible delusion, and I want to see if it cannot be cleared away again.’

‘It is not a delusion; it can never be cleared away. You might have taken my word for it,’ replied her brother.

‘No, Bernie, I cannot. I must hear everything about it, from beginning to end. I want to know what Mr Cole said, and why he said it, and what it was that frightened dear Phyllida away? Oh, Bernie, I love her so dearly—she is like my own sister to me. I cannot give her up at a moment’s

notice, and on the condemnation of a man who is a perfect stranger to me.'

'Oh, Laura, you might have spared me this ordeal,' groaned Bernard, with his face buried in his hands. 'I tell you there is no mistake—it is but too true—and the fact that directly she was taxed with her crime, she fled from my protection, is sufficient proof that she knew it to be true.'

'Who taxed her with it?'

'Nelson Cole. He knew her in America, under the name of Harcourt.'

'Bernie, I hate this Nelson Cole. What does he mean by coming as a welcomed guest into such a happy family as ours, and spreading misery and dissension amongst us in this way?'

'You don't know what you are talking of, Laura. You cannot understand such a matter. No *man*, who is worthy of the name, could see his friend the dupe of an artful *intriguante*, without opening his eyes to his disgrace.'

‘ Bernard, how *dare* you speak of Phyllida by such a name ? ’ replied his sister boldly ; ‘ if *you* can forget in so short a time all she has been to you, *I* cannot. An *intriguante* ! I would as soon believe myself to be one. ’

‘ Oh, Laurie, Laurie, you don’t know how much harder you are making all this for me to bear. Yesterday I would have said the same as yourself—to-day I cannot. But don’t think that I would not blot out the conviction (if I could) with my heart’s blood. God knows, I would die ten thousand deaths to restore Phyllida to the place she once held in my estimation. ’

‘ And so would I, darling ; so would I, ’ cried the warm-hearted Laura, ‘ and do you think it possible that a *bad* woman would have been able to gain such power over us as that ? Do you imagine that a deceitful, lying adventuress (such as Mr Nelson Cole would wish us to believe dear Phyllida to be) could change all at once to the sweet, loving, sympathising soul who made herself the

good angel of Bluemere? Why, brother, the people simply worship her. And you have let your fine American friend drive her away.'

'She went of her own accord,' sighed poor Bernard; 'besides, no sophistry nor arguments can alter facts, and the fact remains—she was a married woman.'

'To whom was she married?'

'Oh, what does it matter? to some low ruffian in the States; or rather she was divorced from him (but you know how I regard divorce), when she was cruel enough to go through the farce of wedding me.'

'Is her husband dead since then?'

'Yes. He died some months ago.'

'Then you can marry her over again,' cried Laura confidently.

'Laura, of what are you thinking? Marry a woman who laid herself out to deceive me. Who lived here for six months with a secret that was eating out her very heart, and never disclosed it to her hus-

band, who sat at my table and smiled in my face—'

'Yes, and who brought sunshine into your heart despite the canker in her own ; who could make the poor happy whilst she suffered herself ; who could watch by the bedside of the sick whilst she wanted comfort and consolation most of all. My poor, brave Phyllida ; my dear, sweet sister. If everybody else turns against her, I will search the world until I have found her, and thanked her for all the love she showed to us.'

But Bernard turned away from Laura with offended dignity. How hard it is to knock his pride out of the very best of Englishmen. It is an integral part of himself. The poor man shows it as openly as the rich, and both are rather proud of being proud than otherwise. Bernard Freshfield's heart was burning to relieve itself by tears ; the mention of Phyllida's virtues touched him to the very quick ;

but he would not give way to the weakness of allowing any part of her to be good. *She had deceived him*, that was quite sufficient.

‘I should be sorry that my mother should hear you speak in such a manner, Laura,’ he said gravely. ‘Whatever my—my—I mean whatever Phyllida was in Bluemere she can never be again, and she would never have been had her antecedents been honestly revealed to us. Cole knew her as a burlesque actress on the American stage, and—and—not always as quietly conducted as she should have been even there.’

‘How *mean* of him to tell, even if he *did* know,’ replied the girl with flashing eyes. ‘But I don’t believe it, and I won’t; and even if she *were* an actress, does that make her good deeds the less to be admired? It makes them a thousand times more valuable. It is not often a woman gives up all the excitement and gaiety of pro-

fessional life to be the Lady Bountiful of an out-of-the-way village, and dispense liniments and bandages to the poor. You have made Phyllida rise instead of sink in my estimation by that announcement, Bernard, *I* can tell you.'

But the rock had not yet been smitten by the rod that should make the waters flow.

'It would be well if we all possessed so staunch a little advocate as yourself in our troubles, Laura,' he answered with a sickly smile; 'but I must really ask you now to leave me. I have a lot of business on hand, and I am not in very good form for working.'

'Bernard, where is Phyllida?'

'I cannot tell you. Why will you continue to mention a name which you must know is agony for me to hear?'

'But you don't expect me to drop it for ever, brother, surely? A person can't come in and go out of our lives again in

this fashion without leaving some trace behind. When are you going after her?’

‘*Never!*’ he said resolutely.

‘I don’t believe it.’

‘You must believe what you choose, Laura. It is impossible for you to read my heart. I can only tell you what is written there. And one thing is, that Phyllida Moss and I will never meet in this world again.’

‘Then I don’t envy your chances of meeting her in the next,’ said his sister defiantly; ‘an unforgiving spirit will be, I should imagine, about the last to enter heaven.’

‘Laura, will you be good enough to leave me to myself? You are increasing my torture to a degree of which I could not have believed you capable.’

‘What am I to say to mother, then?’

‘Tell her the truth.’

‘Yes; when I know what is the truth.’

‘I have already told you ; I have nothing more to say.’

‘It will be a grand opportunity for mamma, certainly,’ continued Laura, hoping by sarcasm to rouse her brother into action, ‘for she is going to hold a regular levee of saints next week, and they will be as happy tearing poor Phyllida’s character to shreds as your kennel over a defunct sheep. Miss Janet’s brother, the Laird o’ Muckheep, is once more standing on his native heather, and she has volunteered a visit for all three of them to Blue Mount. It will be a sort of universal jubilee. I believe mamma entertains flattering hopes that the pious laird may take a fancy to transplant me to Barrick-gallagas Castle ; and now that Phyllida is out of the way for good and all, Miss Bella may yet have a chance of reigning at Briarwood—the news will just reach them in time. I expect we shall have meetings called for praise and thanksgiving every day.’

‘Laura, Laura, you are going too far,’ said poor Bernard, writhing under the lashes she gave him.

‘I shall never have gone far enough until I have found Phyllida again,’ was the girl’s parting shot, as she ran hurriedly from the room, lest she should break down under the crushing disappointment she felt. She was to tell her mother then—there was no help for it—and she would have to undergo the purgatory of hearing the name which had become so dear to her, vilified and abused in every possible way. How Miss Janet would hold forth on ‘carnal procleevities;’ how Bella would blink her sandy eyelashes, and pull down the corners of her coarsely-moulded mouth, and profess to be too much shocked to take part in the conversation. How the hateful laird (for Laura hated the laird before she had seen him) would thank God he was not as other men are, and her infatuated mother would chime in and agree

with everything they said, and think them the most pious people she had ever met.

Well, what must be, must be ; but though she was a brave young woman, Laura Freshfield felt that she would dearly like to have some one to help her in breaking the news to her mother ; some one to stand between herself and the inevitable storm ; some one to make the best of things, not only at Blue Mount but at Briarwood. And feeling thus, her thoughts seem to go naturally (as it were) to Charles Anderson, Bernard's greatest friend, and a man to whom he would listen, perhaps, sooner than to any other, because he had strong religious feelings, and had given up his best prospects in life for the sake of his faith. Mr Anderson was resident in London ; but our young lady was quite equal to dispatching a telegram to his address ; and the same afternoon he appeared at Blue Mount. Laura contrived to receive him alone (indeed Mrs Freshfield always shirked the

young Catholic's presence, from dread of social contamination), and in a few minutes she had put him in possession of the terrible story.

'Go over to Briarwood and tell Bernie what to do,' she said, in conclusion; 'he will take your advice, Charlie, when he would listen to that of no other. He thinks so highly of your discretion and powers of judgment.'

'He flatters me, Laura,' replied Anderson, 'and you have set me a very difficult task, yet I will do my best for your sake and Bernard's; but what *can* I say to him?'

'Charlie, wasn't their marriage sacred?'

'Of course, my dear Laura, all marriages are sacred; but in this case you see—'

'Oh, I am not speaking of its legality,' she interrupted hastily; 'I know, of course, that the marriage ceremony would have to be performed over again; but I am speaking of their hearts. They truly loved each other. Bernie used to say theirs was a

perfect union ; that they were in reality *one*. How can anything that occurred *before* that marriage destroy its sacred unity ?'

'It is a hard question to answer, Laura ; you must give me time to think over it.'

'I cannot do that. You must either go over to Briarwood at once, or break this dreadful intelligence to mamma ; for I tremble at every ring at the bell lest it should bring some visitor open-mouthed to inform her of it. But *do* go to Bernie first. He would hardly speak to me this morning ; but to you he may confide something that will soften the blow to mamma.'

'I can refuse you nothing, Laura,' replied Mr Anderson, as he prepared to start for Briarwood.





CHAPTER IV.

HE reached Briarwood at dusk, and found his friend Bernard 'still in the library, professing to read and write, but in reality doing nothing but stare into vacancy. He had not moved from his seat all day, nor taken any nourishment. The fire was nearly out; the lamps were unlighted; the desolation of the apartment bespoke the corresponding feeling in the owner's heart.

'This is kind of you, Charlie,' he said languidly, as Anderson took his hand, but he never rose from his seat to welcome him; 'how did you hear the news? I

can see you *have* heard it from your face ; surely it is not in possession of the newspapers yet ? ’

‘ No, no, Bernard, no such thing ; don’t talk nonsense. I came down to Bluemere on receipt of a telegraphic message from your good little sister, who has an idea that the presence of an old and very true friend may prove some comfort to you in this trouble.’

‘ Nothing can comfort me, Charlie, and no one. It is a wound past cure. The sooner I bleed to death the better.’

‘ Yes,’ said Anderson reflectively, ‘ and meanwhile, what is to become of your profession and your parish and your people ? ’

‘ I need have no fear for them,’ replied Bernard. ‘ They could not fall into worse hands than mine. I have been altogether wrong from beginning to end. I see it more plainly now than I have ever done.’

‘Indeed, this is news to me. I imagined that you and Bluemere were on excellent terms with one another, and that everything in the parish was working smoothly and well. How long is it since you found out it is altogether wrong?’

‘Since she left me!’ burst out Bernard passionately; ‘since she took all the sunshine and hope of life away with her, and made me the most miserable man upon earth. It is she who has done it all, Anderson; I swear it. We were—we were so happy together, and now there is nothing before me but a wretched blank. I feel as if I were going to the devil, and it won’t be her fault if I *don’t* go there.’

‘Bernard, you shock me,’ said Anderson, ‘and make me feel more strongly than ever how wise is our Church in prohibiting the marriage of her priests. A woman—one single woman turns out to be something different from what you expected her to be, and everything in consequence—your vows,

your profession, your people, and your prayers—are to look after themselves, or worse. I couldn't have believed it of you.'

'I know what you would tell me,' replied Bernard wildly, 'that God is left, and whatever happens, He is always ours, and I know it—*I know it!* but oh, Charlie, old boy, He is behind a cloud. I cannot see Him or hear Him, or feel His hand; and I am going mad. I know I am. I am going out of my senses with grief and longing and fear.'

And throwing his head suddenly down upon his outstretched arms, Bernard Freshfield gave way to one of those storms of emotion which men sometimes indulge in, and cried as violently at if he had been a child. His friend did not attempt to check him; on the contrary, he left his seat and walked round the room, professing to examine the pictures and ornaments, until Bernard should have had time to recover

himself. But, by-and-by, whilst the parson was still catching his breath in the convulsive manner that succeeds passionate weeping, he felt a kind, warm hand laid on his, which, without looking up, he grasped between both of his own.

‘Charlie, dear old fellow,’ he sobbed, ‘you have always been like a brother to me, but this is an ill you cannot cure.’

‘I don’t profess even to *try* to do so, dear Bernard,’ said Anderson; ‘but perhaps it may be ameliorated. When you feel strong enough for the task I want you to tell me all the rights and wrongs of it.’

‘There *are* no rights—it is all wrongs,’ groaned the unfortunate husband, ‘and it has humiliated me as nothing else on earth could have done. Fancy, Charlie, *me*, with my grand ideas of the sanctity of marriage, the greatest human sacrament in existence—the institution of God for the regeneration of mankind by a dual existence—taken in, duped, dishonoured by the woman whom

I had made part of my very life. But I see it all now; my eyes are open. I worshipped her instead of the God who made her, and I am justly punished for my sin. But oh, if the Lord had but adopted some other means by which to empty the vials of His wrath upon me.'

'Bernard, did your wife—'

'Don't call her by that name. She is *not* my wife.'

'If I understood your sister rightly, she believed herself to be your wife, and you believed her to be so, therefore I think she has every claim to the name. However, I will call her Mrs Freshfield. You will at least not refuse to grant her the courtesy which is accorded to those women who assume her position, knowing it to be such.'

Bernard groaned, but answered nothing.

'When Mrs Freshfield left Briarwood, she surely gave an explanation of her actions to some one.'

‘She left a note behind her for me.’

‘May I ask what was in it, Bernard?’

The parson unlocked a drawer in his writing-table, and taking thence a half sheet of paper, threw it across to his friend.

‘You can read it if you like. There it is.’

Anderson took the note in his hands and examined it closely; when he had finished the perusal, he simply raised his eyes and fixed them on those of his companion.

‘Well,’ said Bernard, in a tone of voice as though he defied him to find any excuse for Phyllida in that.

‘Well,’ echoed Anderson, ‘have you read this letter, Bernard?’

‘Of course I have read it.’

‘More than once? When you have been calm enough to decipher its meaning?’ persisted his friend.

‘I don’t know what you’re driving at, Charlie. The words are plain enough—no one can misunderstand them.’

‘I should have thought so, too, but it

appears I am mistaken. May I read it to you ?’

‘ If you will, but I don’t see the use of it.’

Anderson, not heeding the grumbling remonstrance, commenced to read,—

“ Bernard, by the time this reaches you, your friend will have told you all he knows about me ; and you will have learned how much you have been deceived.” ’

‘ There, you see what she says herself,’ interrupted Freshfield. ‘ She acknowledges I was grossly deceived.’

‘ How could she do otherwise, poor girl ?’ replied Anderson ; ‘ the question is, how far she was deceived herself. Her words tell how deeply she felt for you.’

“ But oh, my darling, don’t fret about it. I will never disgrace you more. I am going away where you will never hear of me. Only try to forget everything about me, *excepting*”—read, Anderson, slowly and emphatically—“ *excepting* that I loved you very dearly, and had not *strength* to do what I

ought to have done. But indeed—*indeed*, I believed myself to be your wife.”’

‘Does she say that?’ asked Freshfield quickly, as Anderson came to a full stop.

‘Does she say that? Of course she does. I thought you told me just now that you had read the letter.’

‘So I did, when I first received it, but it was such an awful blow to me, my head was all in a whirl; and then I had to go with Cole to London and see a fellow called Neville, who had known her in the lowest possible position, and oh, Charlie,’ continued Bernard, breaking down again, ‘if you had heard what they had to tell me, you would never talk of there being any hope again.’

‘Bernard, old fellow, confide the very worst to me. You know I am to be trusted, and I cannot advise you unless I hear it. What are the most serious charges these gentlemen bring against Mrs Freshfield?’

‘That she is the daughter of some low ruffian who kept a gambling saloon in Sacramento Valley.’

‘Well, that is unfortunate ; but it is not her fault, and it has certainly left no traces on her behaviour. What next?’

‘She was married at sixteen to a man who turned out to be a criminal, Anderson, a forger, and got two years’ imprisonment in a New York gaol ; and, meanwhile, Phyllida, who was on the stage—fancy the stage for *my wife*, Charlie ! (he interpolated with a shudder)—got an irregular divorce from the brute, and came to England and married me,—*I*, who do not believe in any kind of divorce ; and had I known her antecedents, would have avoided her even as a friend.’

‘I thought you considered yourself a broad-minded man,’ said Anderson ; ‘however, let that pass. Did Mrs Freshfield consider her divorce to be complete, from a moral as well as a legal point of view ?’

‘I suppose she did, from what she says here.’

‘And married you, believing herself a free woman?’

‘Perhaps so; but that didn’t make her free.’

‘Can you call to mind, Freshfield, whether in your courting days you ever questioned her as to her past? It seems strange you should have married a woman who was an absolute stranger to you.’

‘I am not sure if I did. I know she refused to marry me several times, and made me so mad, that I was determined to have her at all risks.’

‘Rather a worldly sort of proceeding that for a parson,—eh, Bernard? and one that lays the onus of such a marriage more upon your shoulders than her’s. Don’t you think so?’

‘Oh, I don’t deny I was to blame, Charlie. I am only cursing my own folly in being so easily taken in.’

‘I deny that you were “taken in.” It appears to me you entered into the contract with your eyes wide open to the truth that they were not so; in fact, it suited your convenience to be hoodwinked.’

‘I was infatuated with her,’ sighed Freshfield. ‘No woman has ever held me in such thrall as she did—’

‘As she *does*, you mean. Now look here, Bernard, it seems to me the case stands thus—you meet a very pretty girl of whom you know nothing, and fall desperately in love and marry her nilly-willy. She (believing herself to be free) takes you at your word, and you probably said that you couldn’t live without her. Didn’t you, now?’

‘Oh, I daresay I did. She made fool enough of me for anything.’

‘She has certain unfortunate antecedents (I won’t call them disgraceful, for they were not her fault. How could

she help being married to a forger or thrown on the stage for a subsistence), and naturally, I suppose, she argues that if there is no need to disclose them, it will be the happier for both that you should remain in ignorance. It is not strict honour, you know, according to the code of rules men set down for one another — but you mustn't judge a woman's morals as you would those of our sex. They are not reared under the same method. Besides, I conclude she was in love, and everything may go to the winds for a woman when she's once thoroughly in love.'

'Charlie, what are you driving at?' demanded Bernard, with open eyes.

'Nothing, my dear boy, unless you will answer me this question. Do you still love Phyllida Moss?'

A look of the deepest agony passed over the parson's face, such a look as we may suppose on the features of a man

wrestling with God for pardon for some mortal sin.

‘*Love her!*’ he ejaculated. ‘God knows I love her with every fibre of my wretched heart. Oh, Anderson, that is the worst of it. I feel that I shall never cease to love her to my dying day.’

‘No, Bernard, that is the best and not the worst of it. If these are your feelings, the sooner you are re-united to that woman the better.’

Hope flashed into Freshfield’s haggard face, as the sun suddenly breaks out from behind a murky cloud. His misery had been that re-union with Phyllida seemed impossible, and when a friend suggested to him what he had not dared to whisper to himself, it seemed as if the idea would suffocate him. He pulled at his round collar as though he were choking, and rising from his seat threw open the library window. It was already dark as night, but the air was full of sound and

the baying of the dogs—those dogs she had so dearly loved—was borne distinctly from the adjacent kennel. Bernard leaned out of the open casement for a moment to recover himself, then he said in a strangely altered voice, there was so much fearful joy in it,—

‘But how—*how* could that be, Anderson? If all my wishes tended to forgive her—’

‘What the d—l have you got to forgive?’ exclaimed Anderson suddenly. ‘She is the victim of an error, or twenty errors if you like, into nineteen of which you led her, and all you have to do is to follow that girl—*your wife*, mind you—the woman whom you *made* your wife by love, and confidence, and union, more surely than any bands of law can do it—and satisfy the demands of your country and your conscience by marrying her over again. If you do not, Bernard—if you cast her off now, after having nurtured

her in your bosom, to wander where she will—I shall look on you as no better than a seducer.’ And in his excitement Anderson walked up and down the room like a caged lion.

‘But my profession — my people,’ stammered Bernard. ‘Can I bring her here again to reign in Bluemere, where every labourer’s child will have heard her history?’

‘Don’t bring her here, then; you are an independent man. Take her anywhere that seems best to you. You have not married your people, but you *have* married her, and your first duty is towards her. What do you suppose it will benefit you to appear before the Almighty with five thousand converts shining like jewels in your crown, whilst the one soul you have sworn to protect and cherish is damned for ever-lasting, through the cowardice which would prevent your bearing the shame

of your mutual error before the world ?'

'Damned! my Phyllida! Oh, God forbid,' cried Bernard, with the tears running down his cheeks. 'May He condemn me to the very nethermost hell if I neglect any means by which to save her soul. But, Charlie, I took the vows of ordination as well as those of marriage. Can I keep both?'

'I see no obstacle to it, old friend. It may not be advisable to continue your work here, but there is work waiting for you all over the world, wherever there are fellow-creatures to be taught and souls to be saved.'

'Charlie, you have given me fresh life,' cried the parson, seizing his friend's hand; 'this is what I longed to do, but feared lest the desire alone was a temptation of the devil. But you have cleared the mists from my brain. I can see God once more, not as the stern judge, con-

demning my folly, but the loving Father who pities it, and holds out His hand once more for me to grasp, as I grasp yours.'

'Keep fast hold of it, Bernard, and you cannot go wrong. And now, if you will take my advice, you will send me back to Blue Mount to break the intelligence to your mother.'

'Will it be necessary to tell her?' Laura thought not.'

'Laura, in her love for you, thinks only of what will save you pain. I am sure it is necessary, Bernard, for two reasons. One is because concealment must lead to deception, and deception is wrong; the other, that in order to thoroughly clear your wife's character, everybody must know of the second marriage. You cannot keep this matter an entire secret. Little things will leak out here and there; and unless you are perfectly open, the next thing you will hear is, that you were never married at

all. Let me tell Mrs Freshfield that as you have discovered that your wife was a divorced woman at the time of your marriage, you consider it necessary to have the ceremony performed over again, and she has left Bluemere until it can be accomplished. This will be the truth (if not all the truth), and will be putting, I think, as good a construction upon the matter as we can.'

'Charlie, you are a true, good friend!' exclaimed Bernard. 'Your visit has raised me from the very depths of human misery to the hope of renewed happiness. My Phyllida, my darling! Is it possible that she may be mine again—mine by the laws of man, and with the smile of God upon our union? Oh, Charlie, it is too much—I cannot realise it!'

'Don't try to do anything but *act*, old fellow. You've been realising too much already, it strikes me; you look ten years older in a couple of days. A

change of work will be the best thing for you.'

'What shall I do first, Charlie? It is you who must advise me.'

'Go up to town to your friend Cole. Tell him of your intentions, and get him to help you in your search. I fancy he is more used to that sort of work than you are.'

'True, true; and he is the best of fellows, though he *did* deal me such a terrible blow. I will start for London by the seven o'clock train; and you — what will *you* do, old chum?'

'I shall return to Blue Mount, and try to smooth matters over for the old lady.'

'Give her my love, Charlie, and explain why I felt myself unable to carry the news myself.'

'I will explain everything; never fear.'

'You are the very best of fellows,' said

Bernard earnestly. 'What can I ever do to repay you?'

'Some day I may put your gratitude to the test,' replied Anderson, laughing, as he bid his friend farewell.





CHAPTER V.

MRS PENFOLD was not staying with Mrs Pinner, although the housekeeper was quite correct in saying she had gone there. But in the afternoon of the day succeeding Phyllida's mysterious flight, and whilst Bernard was still in town, she had received a note by post, a faint scrawl in pencil, half washed out by tears, in which her cousin had told her partly the truth,—had said, at least, that she had disgraced Mr Freshfield beyond all remedy, and should never return to Briarwood again. And then Mrs Penfold had felt that the rectory was no longer the place

for her, and that it would be more delicate to go at once before the parson came home. So she had packed up her small belongings and thrown herself on the hospitality of her sister. Perhaps, if Mrs Pinner had sympathised with her anxiety about Phyllida, or shown the least compassion for the unfortunate girl, cast upon the world for the second time, friendless and alone, Mrs Penfold might have prolonged her stay in Blue-mere until she had ascertained what position the Freshfields intended to take up with regard to her cousin's behaviour. But Mrs Pinner's condemnation was so entirely without limit, that Mrs Penfold made up her mind to return to Gatehead the very next day.

‘Be good enough, Maria,’ Mrs Pinner had said, when her sister tried to make some excuse for the absent girl on account of her defective training, ‘be good enough never to mention that disgraceful creature's name in my hearing again. We cannot touch

pitch without being defiled, and I feel as if it would be a long time before my house and surroundings recovered the contamination they must have contracted from her presence here.'

But Mrs Penfold had a mother's heart. It was quite a mistake on the part of nature not to have given her children, for she would have loved them tenderly, and her thoughts and prayers, poor old soul, were with her erring little cousin night and day.

'Indeed, Charlotte,' she replied, 'I think you are too hard on her. Of course I cannot entirely understand her reasons for leaving Briarwood from the very incoherent note she sent me, but I can see that she thinks it her duty to go, and that she is very, very miserable in going; and a woman who does her duty, although it makes her wretched, cannot be altogether bad.'

'Stuff and nonsense,' said Mrs Pinner. 'You always were a simpleton, Maria, but I hardly thought you could be so silly at

your age. Do you suppose it's likely she's gone *alone*? Did you ever hear of a married woman running away by herself? You must be a born fool to believe it.'

'Good gracious me, Charlotte, what do you mean? Who do you suppose she would take with her? Besides, I am *certain* she went alone. There were only Mr Freshfield and Mr Cole and the servants in the rectory at the time, and I can answer for it they all stayed behind.'

Mrs Pinner gazed at her sister with the supremest contempt.

'Well, if this comes of letting lodgings,' she began, when the other interrupted her,—

'Do you mean to insinuate,' she said indignantly, 'that Phyllida has disgraced us all by running away with *a man*? Oh, Charlotte, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. And when you know how devoted she was to Mr Freshfield, how can you say so wicked and cruel a thing?'

‘Hoity toity,’ cried Mrs Pinner, ‘here’s a flare up about nothing. What do you suppose all the village are saying about it? Annie Warren tells me there is hardly a cottage where they have not heard the whole story, and put their own construction on it. Run away alone, indeed; a likely story. No one else will believe it if *you* do—not if she came back to-morrow with that smooth hypocritical face of her’s and swore she’d only been on a round of parochial visits.’

‘But who could she run away with?’ gasped Mrs Penfold, staggering under the unexpected assertion.

‘Who, indeed? As if my lady hadn’t cunning enough to keep all her affairs secret. You know how close she was from the beginning. Don’t ask who *is* it, but who may it *not* be. Any one, I should say, who would take her. Mr Anderson, perhaps, for want of a better. Those Papists will do anything if they’re not found out, and

Mr Anderson is one of the slyest looking men I ever saw.'

'Charlotte!' exclaimed Mrs Penfold, looking her sister full in the face, 'you are the very wickedest woman I ever saw.'

'*What!*' screamed Mrs Pinner.

'I repeat it, the wickedest woman I ever saw. You go to church twice every Sunday and read your Bible, and say your prayers, and you are always talking of religious things and using sacred names; but you haven't got as much charity in you as a grain of mustard seed. You made the worst instead of the best of poor Phyllida from the very beginning, and only left off abusing her when she became Mr Freshfield's wife, and there was everything to gain by keeping friends with her. And now that she is under a cloud again, poor little soul, though you know no more of the facts of the case than I do, you suspect her of the grossest iniquity without any better foundation than what your unworthy suspicions supply you with.

But, in my opinion, you are much more to blame than she is (since you have enjoyed so many more privileges), and, instead of reviling her, you had better go upstairs and go down on your knees and pray to Heaven to change your hard heart and make you more charitable to your fellow-creatures.'

During this harangue Mrs Pinner's face had gradually assumed the appearance of an infuriated turkey cock. Her wattles (if I may be allowed to use such an expression for a lady's double chin) had turned purple, her forehead was crimson, and every poppy in her cap shook, as though under the breath of a tornado.

'Maria Penfold,' she ejaculated as soon as she could speak, 'leave my house!'

'You need not take the trouble of turning me out, Charlotte. I wouldn't stay here if you paved my room with gold. No, and I wouldn't change places with you (although you do look down on

me for letting lodgings), not if you were a duchess in your own right.'

'Leave my house!' repeated Mrs Pinner. 'I will listen to no more insults at your hands.'

'And you never will,' was Mrs Penfold's parting shot, 'for unless your hard heart is softened, and you begin to practise the religion which at present you only talk about, I shall take good care not to see you again,' and with that she sent out for the only vehicle to be hired in Bluemere, and was landed safely by the train in Gatehead the same evening.

But she had the consolation of receiving an unfeignedly hearty welcome on her return. Miss Annadale, who scarcely ever stirred out of her own apartments, came half way down stairs to greet her landlady, and Captain Barclay insisted on her sharing his roast chicken and mushrooms, and drinking a glass of Madeira with him in his snug little

parlour, instead of sitting down to a solitary meal.

‘First-rate wine that, Mrs Penfold,’ said the old sailor, as he handed her a bumper of the rich coloured Madeira; ‘drink it down. It will do you good, I promise you. That Madeira made four voyages round the Cape in my own ship, Mrs Penfold, so I ought to know its quality, if no one else does.’

And under the influence of the Madeira, and Captain Barclay’s kindness, the poor woman unbosomed her griefs to him, and confided her fears with regard to her young cousin.

‘Think of that poor young creature, captain, wandering about the world alone—and so pretty, too. What will become of her? I assure you I haven’t slept a wink since it happened, for wondering what I can do to find her again. For whether she’s right or wrong, she’s too young to be left to herself, and I

must have her back at Gatehead, as sure as my name is Maria Penfold.'

'Mrs Penfold,' exclaimed the old sailor, extending his brown hand across the table for her acceptance, 'you're a good woman, madam! — a good woman, never mind who the other may be. Let that pretty girl with the big brown eyes go about the world alone, without a friend or protector? By gad! no. Why, I'd protect her myself, if there was no one else to do it. But I don't see how you are to get at her, my dear, unless you advertise in the papers.'

'Why, of course, captain, that is the very thing,' cried Mrs Penfold, jumping up from her chair; 'and I'll have the advertisement written out and sent to the post-office this very evening. I suppose I'd better insert it in the *Telegraph* and *Standard*.'

'And the *Times*, my dear, the *Times*,' added the captain, who was used to becoming rather affectionate in his speech after dinner.

‘And the *Times*, of course,’ replied Mrs Penfold. ‘What a help you are to me, captain. Whatever should I do without you?’

‘And when you have dispatched your advertisement, you will come back again, won’t you?’ said Captain Barclay.

‘Well, captain, if you *really* require me,’ replied Mrs Penfold bashfully.

‘*Really* require you, madam. I really require you every hour of the day. You don’t know what my life has been during your visit to Bluemere—torture, Mrs Penfold, torture. Sarah has been very attentive—I have no complaint to make of Sarah; but she is not, and she cannot be, yourself; that is her misfortune, Mrs Penfold, and not her fault. I have missed you every day and everywhere. My bed has not felt the same, and my parlour has not looked the same, and this chicken, for instance—although Sarah has done her best with it, I am sure, her very best—yet this chicken.

is *not* browned in the way *you* would have browned it; eh, Mrs Penfold?’

‘Well, you see, captain, it is impossible to put grey heads on green shoulders; however, I am home once more to attend to all your little comforts, and not likely to leave you again in a hurry.’

‘Not if I know it, madam, not if I know it,’ replied Captain Barclay, with a facetious wink at his landlady.

‘Well, really, captain, I don’t see how you are to prevent it; not if my mind were bent upon going, for instance.’

‘There are ways and means, Mrs Penfold, ways and means,’ said the captain, with another wink.

Meanwhile, we must return to Blue Mount. Charles Anderson only waited until Bernard was well out of the way to break the intelligence of her son’s disappointment to Mrs Freshfield, and do what he could to comfort her, the poor old lady’s grief and shame were but too

genuine. A divorced woman was, in her eyes, quite as ineligible a subject for the marriage contract as a wife would be, and Anderson did not attempt to refute any of her arguments on this part of the matter. Only he kept on repeating the fact that Phyllida's first husband was now dead, and therefore according to the laws of God and man there could be no possible obstacle to her re-union with Bernard. But to his astonishment he found that Mrs Freshfield did not take this view of the subject at all, and was strongly opposed to the idea of her son having anything more to do with the woman who, in her opinion, had betrayed him. This mother, who had reared her child in the strictest principles of her own religion ; who had dedicated him from his birth (as it were) to the Lord and His service, and who (Anderson would have supposed) could have but one desire in her heart at this crisis, namely, that Bernard should act up to

his profession, and do what was right; commenced arguing against the advisability of a second marriage on the most worldly grounds.

‘But it would be perfect madness,’ she said, when Anderson confided to her the motive that had taken her son to town. ‘Surely, Mr Anderson, you never gave Bernard such advice as that? By the Lord’s mercy he has been delivered from the bonds of a strange woman, though, if he had only waited to consult his poor mother on the subject, he never would have married a person of whom one knew *positively nothing*; however, he was headstrong, and had his own way, and now that his evil has been turned into good, I consider it would be flying into the face of Providence to re-forge the chains that have been struck off him.’

‘Do you mean to say then, Mrs Freshfield, that you would advise Bernard *not* to marry his wife again?’

‘Certainly, I would, Mr Anderson. She is *not* his wife. You have said so yourself. She is only a most disreputable person—a disgrace to her sex—a—’

‘Oh, pardon me, I never said so much as that, because I do not think it; but, even if it were the case, I am not sure but what it would still be Bernard’s duty to try and reform her by the only means in his power.’

‘Well, I consider your ideas of duty are far-fetched, Mr Anderson, and I am surprised to hear a member of *your* Church upholding the sanctity of marriage with a *divorce*. I am no friend to Popery—’

‘No, indeed, you need not tell me that, Mrs Freshfield.’

‘But I do at least agree with it in one particular, and that is, that had this woman’s divorce from her first husband been ever so regular, it should not have permitted her to contract an alliance with my poor misguided son.’

‘And I am not likely to gainsay you, Mrs Freshfield. I say nothing of the past, except that it is as sad as sad can be, and I feel deeply for my dear old friend; but I think that his duty now lies straight before him, and that is to make the woman to whom he is already united by ties of the tenderest affection his wife by law.’

‘Well, I am surprised to hear you say so,’ replied the mother coldly. ‘I was aware, of course, that poor Bernard was very much infatuated with her when he believed her to be a good and pure woman (though why he should have squandered a small fortune in decking her out in pearls and satin far above her station in life I never could understand), but I should have *thought* and *hoped* that, his eyes once opened to her iniquity and deceit, a *son of mine* would have turned from her with the loathing and disgust which she deserves.’

‘Oh no, Mrs Freshfield, don’t wrong your own nature by saying so,’ pleaded

Anderson. 'What! turn from those we love when they most need our counsel and assistance?—look the other way when our dear ones, however erring, lift their tearful eyes to ours?—shut the door upon the repentant sinner who is longing to receive her pardon from our lips? That is not the way a merciful God deals with *our* trespasses—blessed be His holy name!' said Anderson reverently, 'or we should indeed be the most forlorn and miserable of creatures. What should you say, madam, if your heavenly Judge dealt with *your* sins as you would have Bernard deal with hers?'

Now, although Mrs Freshfield called herself a miserable sinner every Sunday, and perhaps two or three times in the week to boot, she did not in the least believe that she was so, and Charles Anderson's straightforward question considerably ruffled her dignity. That a man, and a young man, and above all other things a Catholic young

man, should presume to talk to her in such a manner greatly offended her; and she showed the offence in her answer,—

‘If you intend to compare me with the person we were speaking of, Mr Anderson, we had better drop the subject; for I cannot see that the two cases tally in the slightest degree. I do not need *you* to remind me that there is forgiveness in heaven for *all* who sin on earth, but I do not see how it is to be attained by setting this depraved young woman again in the position which she has polluted and disgraced, and when Bernard *might* have secured one of the most estimable and pious young ladies for his helpmeet — a girl with the oldest blood of Scotland in her veins, and descended from a line of kings—one who would have conducted herself in all things as the wife of a minister should do, and been an honour and blessing to the whole family.’

‘Yes, it is unfortunate, doubtless, that

he could not see with your eyes ; but these are matters, Mrs Freshfield, in which men will and ought to judge for themselves. An union entered into from any feelings, however pure—except those of entire and disinterested love—cannot be a real union. I have seen men marry, apparently from the best of motives—for conscience' sake—or for the good of others, but however unselfishly entered into, unless it is from love alone, marriage is no longer a sacrament, but sinks to the level of a legal contract.'

'And would you call my poor son's marriage with this dreadful girl a sacrament, Mr Anderson?'

'I do indeed, Mrs Freshfield, and would continue to do so, even if he did not marry her over again. His heart is knit up in hers, as hers is no less in his, and *that* constitutes a true marriage.'

'I don't believe it,' interposed the old lady, trembling with excitement. 'My poor

son's eyes were dazzled by her beauty till he could not distinguish right from wrong, and I consider that any one who persuades him to take that woman back again, is his worst enemy, and not his friend.'

'And you would wish Bernard never to see her again then, nor to inquire after her fate?'

'Decidedly I would. He has taken a wife from among the daughters of Heth as the rebellious son of Rebecca did, and you see what has come of it. He ought to thank Providence, who has helped him to escape so great a danger, and not fly in its face by courting it a second time.'

'And you would consider him free to marry again if he felt inclined to do so?' continued the young man.

'Of course he is free. What claim can she bring against him? Oh, if Bernard would only see it in the same light, and put some dear good girl in the vacant place!'

‘You think the divorce he has obtained from his present wife is more legal than the one *she* got from her former husband?’

‘Oh, there is no question of divorce,’ replied the old lady, tossing her head in a nervous manner; ‘she never was his wife, and I would rather discuss the painful subject no longer, Mr Anderson.’

‘Very good, madam. I have done Bernard’s bidding, and therefore may take my leave of you. But I am glad I do not share your sentiments on the question of right and wrong; neither do I think they would receive endorsement from above.’

And Anderson quitted Blue Mount, leaving Mrs Freshfield with the very uncomfortable sensation of having been brought to task, and considerably worsted in the encounter. Laura was not present at this interview. Had she been it would not have proceeded with so little interruption, for this young lady coincided with the opinions of Mr Anderson on all subjects

in a remarkable degree. But she received the full benefit of it afterwards.

‘Such an extraordinary manner in which to be addressed by a young man of *his* age—not so old as my own son by a couple of years—and a Papist into the bargain!’ exclaimed Mrs Freshfield, as she retailed the circumstances to Laura. ‘I wonder what the world will come to next? but Mr Anderson may rest assured of one thing, that I know my duty, and I will do it. I should have liked dear Miss Janet to have been present at our conversation this morning. I know she will entirely coincide with the view *I* take of this disgraceful affair.’

‘Oh, mamma dear,’ cried Laura, ‘don’t say anything to that old woman about it. What business is it of hers? And of course if *she* hears it, Bella and the laird will hear it also, and we shall be obliged to listen to all their comments on the matter. It is not delicate, mamma, it is

purely a family misfortune—which we should keep entirely to ourselves for Bernie's sake, if not for our own. And do oblige me by putting off the visit of these Muck-heeps, at all events for the present. They asked themselves, so it could easily be managed without giving them offence.'

Mrs Freshfield regarded her daughter solemnly.

'And you would seriously ask me, Laura,' she said, 'in this, the most unfortunate crisis of my life—when the Hand of Chastening is so visibly upon us—to deprive myself of the counsel and advice of my very best and most valued friends?'

'Oh, mamma, they are not your best friends, believe me. Miss Janet is only a canting old hypocrite, and you have never seen the laird at all. If he is anything like his sister though, I hope he will cut his visit short.'

'*Cut his visit short!*' reiterated Mrs Freshfield, with much the same look that might have been expected of her had her

daughter uttered a blasphemy ; ‘ is that the way, I ask you, Laura, to speak of a man who has spent his life in doing good to his fellow-creatures, who has expatriated himself for their sakes, and relinquished the society dearest to him, in order that he might bring souls grovelling on their knees for pardon.’

‘ Well, mamma, if he has done all this, it is very good of him, but we have only Miss Janet’s word for it, you know. And in any case, we don’t want him to grovel after souls here—unless you have any particular work for him in that way yourself,’ said Laura brightly.

But Mrs Freshfield was in no humour to respond to brightness—however innocent.

‘ I shall *not* put off my friends’ visit,’ she said sternly ; ‘ neither shall I conceal from them the misfortune which has fallen upon us. They will advise me, I am sure, to do what is best in the matter for my unhappy son, whom *your* friend, Mr Anderson, appears bent upon leading to his ruin.’

‘I don’t know why you should emphasise Mr Anderson particularly as *my* friend, mamma,’ returned Laura, with a suspiciously bright colour; ‘but I am not ashamed of him if he is, and I do not believe that he will give Bernie any advice but what is good and proper.’

‘Wait and see,’ was Mrs Freshfield’s oracular reply, for she had a strong suspicion that if she told Miss Laura what she meant by ‘ruin,’ that the wordy warfare just ended with Charles Anderson would have to be fought all over again, so she wisely held her tongue. The arrival of the Muckheeps the day after was a grand event in her life, for, naturally, poor Phyllida’s history had to be retailed from the beginning to the end,—from the first time they met her with Mrs Pinner at Briarwood, to the last time she had sat in that very chair dear Miss Janet was then occupying (‘just as if she had been an honest woman,’ as Mrs Freshfield indignantly added), and the two ladies wept and

wailed and groaned and condemned together over the reputation which they considered dead, just (as Laura had prophesied) like two dogs tearing a carcase to pieces, and determined not to leave a shred without the mark of their teeth upon it. But the Laird o' Muckheep—before whom Miss Janet (and, consequently, Mrs Freshfield) mutely bowed, as though he had been one of the kings from whom he boasted his descent—took little or no part in the discussion.

He was a very different man from what Laura had expected to see him. She had pictured the laird in fancy to be very like his sister,—in fact, an old woman in 'breeks,' but, on the contrary, he did not resemble her in the slightest degree. He was a large-boned, muscular man, very plain, with red hair, a dirty complexion, small ferrety eyes, and a bottle nose. He was, moreover, very silent, and allowed Miss Janet to do all the talking, although he never deprecated the fulsome praise she lavished on him, but

allowed himself to be worshipped with the most perfect nonchalance, taking it apparently as much his right as some ugly old Chinese god set up in a joss house might do, and with about the same amount of interest in his worshippers. Laura, whose eyes were everywhere at the same moment, noticed that whenever Miss Janet lauded her brother's goodness and self-denial, the laird would wink and blink, and become restless and uneasy, changing the subject as soon as he 'could, and sometimes in the most abrupt manner; but as he never denied the praise she gave him, the girl attributed his manner to his modesty.

'Ainly to think, Mrs Fraich-field,' the old Scotchwoman would cry, 'that this gude mon has ex-pectri-ated himsel' fra his ain land far mair than twenty yair in order to been-eft his peerishing fellow-creatures.'

'Noo, noo, Janet,' the laird, who spoke as broad Scotch as his sister, replied, 'it's

mickle I have dune. Let us tairn the soob-ject.'

'*Mickle!*' screamed Miss Janet, 'd'ye ca' it a mickle thing, mon, to bide awa' fra your ain for the space o' twenty yair, an' to pair-se a' that wheele in preaching and praying and striving for the puir sawls that wouldna' strive for themsels. Why, it's joost the laird's wairk that ye've gee-ven up your varry life for, and it's a greet re-waird will be laid up for ye in heaven.'

'Noo, noo, Janet, not me whoole life. Ye forgit that I vee-sited the cairstle ten yairs agoo,' said the laird, with a modest declaimer of so much merit.

'Brither, I maun hae me ain way, and Mrs Fraich-field here will uphoold me. It's a gran' wairk, and a blessed ane that you've geeven yair time to, an' we should a' be prood to claim ye as a freend or a relation. Bella—bar-ck!'

'Yes, indeed, dear Miss Muckheep,' chimed in Mrs Freshfield approvingly. 'We should

indeed be proud, and we are (at least I can speak for myself) to welcome the laird back to England. Twenty years! it is indeed a long time, though none too long to devote to so noble a cause. And were your efforts much blessed out there, dear sir? Did you bring many poor lost souls back into the fold?’

‘Yes, yes; I had pratty gude soocess, madam, althoo’ a mon shouldna speak of what he has dune.’

‘Hoot, brither,’ interposed Miss Janet, ‘but if ye air a bairning and a shining leeght, ye mauna pet yourself oonder the beed, bit upon a carn-dle-steek, that sae ye may geeve leeght to the whoole hoose. Dinna ye haud wi’ me, Mrs Fraich-field?’

‘Indeed, indeed, I do, although your estimable brother’s modesty renders his worth all the greater. Ah, we have been in great need of a missionary to do the good work here, I can assure you. What effect might not the laird’s influence have

had upon that poor misguided soul at the rectory ?’

‘Do ye speak o’ your sonnie the meenister, Mrs Fraich-field, or o’ the hizzy he pet oop theer as his wife ?’

Laura, who had been silently boiling over this conversation, here burst in with a remonstrance,—

‘Please to remember, Miss Janet, that the lady you speak of is about to become my brother’s wife by law.’

‘No, no, Laura, I trust not—not if *I* can help it,’ interposed her mother.

‘You will not be able to help it, mamma; and I think the less the subject is discussed with strangers the better.’

‘Hoot, what is the lassie speering at?’ demanded Miss Janet. ‘Ye dinna shoo muckle re-spect for your mither to inter-roopt her after sic a fashion, Mees Fraich-field.’

‘I desire to show respect for my brother and his wife, madam, which is hardly to

be attained by discussing their private affairs.'

'Laura, how can you speak so to Miss Janet, who, you must know, is in my entire confidence on this unhappy subject? We have just been consulting together on the best course for me to pursue in the matter, and I have made up my mind to follow your poor brother to London to-morrow.'

'Bernard will be exceedingly annoyed if you do so, mamma. He is quite old enough to manage his own business, and you will gain nothing by putting your finger in the pie.'

'Petting your feenger in the poy? I dinna oonderstan' your dairghter's mode of speaking, Mrs Fraich-field. I never raired oor Bella after sic a fashion; it wou'dna become a leddy o' Muckheep at a'.'

'No, indeed,' replied her hostess fretfully; 'nor any lady in the world, I should imagine. Laura's *fast* mode of speaking shocks me as much as it can do yourself.

But to return to my poor, erring son. What a consolation it would be to me if you and the dear laird (who has had so much experience in winning back lost souls to the right way) would accompany me on my sad errand to-morrow. It seems almost too much to ask from you, but I shall need both support and guidance on the journey.'

'If you are resolved to go, mamma,' said Laura, 'for heaven's sake go alone!'

'Young leddy,' exclaimed Miss Janet, 'ye dinna ken the reet way to speak to sech as air abune yairsel'. Your gude mither is awa' to Loon-don to try and breeng your puir brither back to a sense of his re-sponsibeelities; and if I can be of ainy cairm-fort or cainsolation to her on the jair-ney, she maun depeend upon my coompany.'

'Ah, you are indeed too good to me,' sighed Mrs Freshfield. 'What should I do without your kind sympathy and counsel?

If I can gain an interview with my poor Bernard before his artful friend Mr Anderson—a Jesuit in disguise, I verily believe, Miss Janet—persuades him to sacrifice himself afresh, and can bring him back with us to Blue Mount, all may yet be well. The dear laird's advice would be invaluable to him at this critical period. He could so ably point out to my poor boy the way to induce that young person to abandon her depraved and godless life without going to the length of marrying her over again. An asylum is the place for her—some nice, respectable asylum where she will be plainly shown the depths of her wickedness and sin.'

Here Laura rose hastily, and gathering her work together, left the room.

'My poor child does not like this subject,' continued Mrs Freshfield, with a compassionate shake of the head. 'I have trained her carefully, dear Miss Janet, and with many prayers, but her heart, I regret

to say, remains hard and stubborn to this day. I believe that she even goes so far as to *regret* her brother's merciful escape from the thralls of the bond-woman.'

'Ay!' ejaculated Miss Janet. 'Ye should jeest pet me brither upon her in prayer; her hairt wou'dna' lang remain haird nor stooborn after that. Mony and mony a hairt has he subdooed and melted by his fair-vour, till it coudna' weep eno.' Ay!—but he's a peen-acle of the temple before wheech naething can stan' upreet.'

'And do you think I might really ask him to accompany us to town to-morrow? It would be an immense favour; but oh, so gratefully appreciated. I cannot believe that Bernard will be able to resist his eloquence; however, he may be inclined to walk in the downward path.'

'Oh, the laird will go with us, dinna fear, Mrs Fraich-field. He maun aye be wheer the gude wairk is goin' on; and if wairds o' his can tairn the puir sinner fra' the eer-or

of his ways, he will be tairned, ye may reest assured o' that.'

'Indeed, indeed, I do. I feel as if an *angel* were going with us to point out the right thing to do, and the right word to say at the right time,' cried Mrs Freshfield enthusiastically, as she clasped the freckled and hairy hand of the Laird o' Muckheep between her own.

He turned aside with a conscious air and a few muttered words of acquiescence; but his hostess was gazing at him through rose-coloured spectacles, and attributed his confusion entirely to the humility of his pious soul. And the next day, therefore, to Laura's intense annoyance, her mother set out for London, supported on either side by a Muckheep, like sympathising friends upholding the chief mourner at a funeral.

'How angry Bernie will be by their interference,' she thought. 'It would have been bad enough if mamma had elected to go to him alone; but accompanied by that

pair of canting old hypocrites, she will drive him nearly crazy, and when he has so much to trouble him, poor darling.'

She was full of such thoughts when a servant brought her word that Mr Anderson was in the drawing-room. She flew to meet him, in a manner most undignified for a young lady of two-and-twenty, and with a bloom upon her cheeks that looked suspiciously as though she were uncommonly glad to see him. Perhaps Charles Anderson guessed the truth; for as Laura ran up to greet him, he grasped her outstretched hands and kissed her straight upon the lips. She drew backward with a face of crimson.

'Oh, Charlie, you shouldn't have done that. You never did it before.'

'Perhaps not; but there must be a beginning to all things, you know, Laura.'

'Not to bad things, though.'

'Was that a bad thing then, Laura? Tell me.'

‘Well, it can’t be quite right, can it?’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh, I don’t know, but it isn’t the usual mode of greeting between friends, Charlie.’

‘But we are not friends.’

‘Aren’t we?’ she asked, with professed innocence. ‘I thought we were the very best.’

‘So we are; but something more, I hope, Laura. I love you dearly, and I am sure you know it.’

‘I have hoped it, Charlie.’

‘That’s a brave woman to tell the truth at once. Then it’s all right between us?’

‘Between *us*—oh yes! but, Charlie, have you ever thought of mamma?’

Charlie laughed.

‘Rather too often for my peace of mind, Laura. She doesn’t like me; I am aware of that.’

‘I don’t think she has any personal objection to *you*, dear; but it’s the religion. Mamma is frightfully bigoted, you know.

I really believe that she imagines there is not the slightest chance of your going to heaven.'

'And what do *you* think, my Laura?'

'Oh, Charlie, I think you are everything that is best. I only wish I had the same assurance of salvation as yourself. To give up one's family and friends, as you have done, and all one's prospects in life for the sake of your faith, what more could any man do to prove his sincerity? It is a grander sacrifice than even the martyrs made of old. They gave up this life to gain a better; but you have given up all the comforts of the world, and chosen to walk through it without luxury or love, in order that you may remain true to yourself; and I have honoured you for it, dear Charlie, above all other men, ever since Bernard told me the story.'

'Don't make too much of it, Laura. If you could guess the consolations I have received in exchange, you would not think

it such a sacrifice. And now, if I am to have your love into the bargain, I shall be more than happy, only you mustn't forget that I am a poor man. My father has cut me out of his will, and will not even hear my name mentioned in his presence. I have only the work of my two hands to offer my wife as a support.'

'That is not of the slightest consequence,' said Laura indifferently, 'for I have money of my own as well as Bernie. What *I* am thinking of is the prejudice of your father and my mother. Charlie, isn't it extraordinary that people who profess to love God with their whole hearts, and desire His glory above all other things, should quarrel with *any* form by which their fellow-creatures strive to serve Him too?'

'It is almost incredible, Laura, yet we know it is true. But I cannot call such people Christians, even though they are my own flesh and blood. They are pious dogs in the manger: quite satisfied with their own

position, and ready to snarl at any one who attempts to dispute it. I suppose it really did the ox more good to nibble at a few straws than it did the dog to lie on them ; but since he had no stomach for straw himself, he was too blind and selfish to see that the ox needed it. If my friends and relations have no eyes for the beauty of the Catholic Church, and no ears for the sublimity of her doctrine, I pity them and I pray for them ; but I do not blame them, for the mind must be spiritually opened to view it as I do, only I cannot understand why they must needs quarrel because they cannot agree with me.'

'Do you pity me, Charlie?' whispered Laura, sidling up to him.

'A little, because you are going to fall into my clutches. Do you pity yourself?'

She shook her head.

'I am quite happy as I am. I do not know what I may become as the years roll on, but at present it seems to me as if life

could never be fuller of interest for me than it is. I have had Bernie ever since I could remember, and now I have got you, and I cannot tell which is the best of you; he as a Protestant or you as a Catholic. And I hardly know which of you I love the best either,' she added more shyly, 'nor, if I had to give up one, which I should choose. So you must let me be the link between you, Charlie, that when you look at me you may both remember that, as I bind you together by the names of wife and sister, so the great Christian Churches should be bound together in brotherly love by the one Holy Name which alone can save us all.'

Anderson drew Laura closer to his side, and repeated the operation with which he had greeted her entrance, and this time she made no objection, although the tears were shining in her bright eyes.

'Oh, Charlie, I am so happy!'

'So am I, dearest; and you will really

marry me then, spite of all your mother may say?’

‘Mamma will come round after a time. She is generally open to persuasion from Bernie or me. You know how strongly set she was at first against poor Phyllida?’

‘That reminds me, darling, that I came down here this morning with news of Bernard. Let us find Mrs Freshfield and tell her at once.’

Laura’s face fell.

‘Oh, I had quite forgotten. You put everything out of my head, Charlie; mamma, I am sorry to say, has just started for London to see my brother. I begged and entreated her not to go, for I am sure her visit will annoy him, but she would not listen to anything I said; and what is more, she has taken those two Muckheeps with her—the old laird and his sister—and you know how Bernard dislikes Miss Janet. I am sure something very disagreeable will happen when they meet.’

Anderson became as grave as herself.

‘I am exceedingly sorry to hear this, Laura, and I think, under the circumstances, it was the most ill-advised course your mother could take; and this morning, too, of all days.’

‘Why not this morning, Charlie?’ asked Laura in alarm. ‘What has happened to make this day worse than others?’

‘Nothing but what will make *you* glad, Laura, but, at the same time, will render Mrs Freshfield’s visit rather *malàpropos*. Bernard has found his wife again.’

‘Oh! Charlie, why didn’t you tell me that before?’ cried Laura, bursting into tears of pleasure and excitement. ‘Phyllida home again! Phyllida with Bernard! My dear, dear sister found! Oh, I am so grateful, so happy! How can I repay you for bringing me such joyful news?’

‘Kiss me again,’ suggested the practical Charlie.

‘I *will*,’ exclaimed Laura determinately,

as she put both her arms round her lover's neck, and lifted her burning face to his. 'I would give you a hundred kisses, Charlie, if you wished it for making me so happy.'

'All right, Laura ; go on.'

'No, no, we mustn't be foolish. But tell me all about it. Where did he find her? Where are they now? How soon can they be married again?'

'Gently, Laura, you are going too fast. Bernard has received intelligence of his wife—he hoped to meet her again to-day—and as poor Phyllida seems to be in a miserable state of doubt and uncertainty as to whether she ought to return to her husband, he thought the presence of his dear little sister would be of great service to both of them.'

'Did he send you for me? Does he wish me to go to London? Dear, dear Bernie,' said warm-hearted Laura.

'Yes ; indeed that is just what he wants, and sent me to obtain your mother's per-

mission to escort you to his side. He thinks that if his arguments have no effect on Phyllida, your persuasions are certain to prevail.'

'Of course—of course, I will do my very best, and if she will not return to him, I can at least remain with her. But, Charlie, mamma and those horrid Muckheeps will be there. Ought I to go up at the same time?'

'If you are not afraid to trust yourself with me, Laura, I think that fact is an extra reason for your making no delay in joining your brother. It is very probable, I am sorry to say, that they may burst in upon him just as he has been reunited to his wife, and I am afraid to think what may pass between them, or how serious a breach their visit may cause. Your presence will be an immense protection to your sister-in-law, and, I am sure, a comfort to Bernard.'

'Then I will get ready to go with you at once, Charlie. There is only Bella

Muckheep in the house, and as she never does anything but knit stockings, she will not miss me for a few hours. I shall tell her I am suddenly summoned to join my brother. Ring the bell, and order the pony chaise as soon as it can be got ready, and I will be with you again before it comes round.'

And with a smile and a nod, Laura Freshfield flew off to her own room, leaving Charles Anderson in a very contented and self-satisfied frame of mind.





CHAPTER VI.

BERNARD FRESHFIELD had started for London about a week before this, and made his way at once to the hotel where he knew that Nelson Cole had taken up his quarters. He found his friend at home and alone, looking rather more haggard than he had done at Briarwood, as though he had been somewhat anxious and thoughtful since they parted, and sitting at a table covered with papers.

‘Bernard, my boy!’ he exclaimed, as our parson made his appearance, ‘I am glad you have come up to town again. I was

just about to write and ask you to do so. I have heard of some business since I saw you last that will detain me in England, so I expect to be stationary here for the next few weeks; and I want you to spend them with me. It will be ever so much better for you than moping at Briarwood by yourself.'

'Thank you, Cole,' replied Bernard, somewhat shyly, and there he stopped. Nelson Cole was surprised at his manner and appearance. He had expected to see him the very picture of dejection, but he looked rather cheerful than otherwise, although his eyes were heavy and his cheeks pale. Yet there was an air about him as of one who had passed through the suffering and found peace on the other side.

'You are bearing this trouble better than I expected, Bernard,' said Nelson Cole, almost jealously.

'Am I? You don't know what I have gone through since we parted. But I

confess I feel happier now than I hoped to do. I had my dear friend Charles Anderson talking to me for a couple of hours this afternoon, and he made me see things in a different light.'

'Ah, he is the pious Papist, is he not?'

'Yes, he is a Papist; and very proud of being so; and he is pious, like most of his faith. It is an exception to the rule when a Papist is not pious.'

'And he talked to you about heaven, I suppose, and the reward laid up for martyrs who sacrifice themselves to their opinions, until you fell in love with suffering, and are going to add a hair shirt to the loss of your supposed wife?'

'Cole, my dear fellow, why do you speak to me in this way?' exclaimed Bernard. 'I came up to London to tell you of the resolution I have, after much thought, arrived at; but if you are going to treat my confidence with sarcasm, you will frighten it away.'

‘What resolution can you possibly have arrived at but one?’ grumbled Cole; ‘the girl never was married to you according to your own ideas. She has led you into spending some six months in what you would consider to be mortal sin; and all that remains for you is to do penance, and practise mortifications until you have purged yourself of even the memory of her unholy presence. I know you parsons. Everybody may go to the d—l so long as you save your own souls.’

‘But—*was* it sin, Cole?’ asked Freshfield wistfully.

‘Was *what* sin?’ said the other.

‘My living with Phyllida. She believed herself free: I believed her to be so, and I cannot think that an Almighty Father will punish an unintentional error. If we sinned, it was not with our eyes open. No; it is the concealment she used towards me that hurts me so terribly. If I can see her soul purged of that, I shall be content.’

‘ And so you have come up to London, I suppose, to find her out, and bring her down on her knees for confession ? Her husband is to be turned into her missionary, and treat her to a medley of passion and penitence, till the poor child will be totally unable to distinguish right from wrong. No, no, it must not be. I knew the girl in America, and I won’t have her trifled with. You’ve renounced her—I don’t question your right to do so, perhaps she is everything that is bad ; but let the renunciations be final. There are plenty of parsons in the world beside yourself ; and there is no need for you to go running after Phyllida Moss, and doubling her misery for the purpose of converting her.’

Bernard stared at his old friend in amazement. He hardly knew him. Nelson Cole, who had always appeared so hardheaded, cynical and ‘cute,’ was now working himself up into something very much like a passion, and on behalf of a girl whose condition he had been the very one to bring about.

‘I don’t understand you,’ replied Bernard; ‘in the first place, you are bringing accusations against me without any cause; in the second, you condemn me unheard. Was it *I*, Cole, who turned my poor girl out of doors, or pronounced her unfit to hold the position she did at Briarwood? Why, the blow has nearly killed me, and after a day and night of torture, I came here to tell you that I have made up my mind, at all hazards, to find her again, and persuade her to become my wife.’

Nelson Cole pushed the hair off his forehead, and looked up into his friend’s face critically.

‘Is that *so*?’ he asked incredulously; ‘and have you well considered what taking Phyllida back again means in your profession and your family?’

‘I have considered nothing but my own good and her’s—we love each other, Cole—we belong to each other—we stand alone and apart—two in one, inseparable—indivisi-

ble—not, mark you, because the law made us so, but because our hearts were joined before our hands. I have been very angry and very shocked. I don't deny it. Your revelations seemed at first to have made a gulf between us that nothing could again bridge over ; but I am calmer now. I can regard things in a truer light ; and I see that my life and her's will be spoiled if they do not come together again. You laughed at me once for writing and talking of my soul's mate. But it was true. I found her in Phyllida, and in spite of everything she is mine, and she must remain so.'

'You intend to marry her again?'

'I intend, please God, to marry her again.'

Nelson Cole leapt from his chair and seized Bernard's hand.

'God bless you, my boy! God bless you!' he exclaimed. 'You have lifted a weight off my mind.'

'How could I imagine,' returned Bernard,

‘that you would receive my news like this—you who were so hard upon her—Cole?’

‘No, not hard, not *hard*. Was I? Poor child! poor child!’ replied the other man. ‘But if so, I am thankful you have the strength to remedy the harm I did her. Ah, Bernard, she loves you. I could envy you, my boy, for being so much loved, but I will not, for you deserve it. Only guard and protect her from herself for the future, and I will believe that for you at least there is a heaven and a reward laid up in it.’

Then perceiving the look of utter astonishment with which his friend still regarded him, and suddenly remembering that he was talking in a very different strain from what he usually employed, Nelson Cole drifted into a sort of apology for his words.

‘I daresay I seem to be talking a great deal of nonsense to you; but the fact is, Bernard, I found out the other day, from a conversation I had with Jack Neville, that

Phyllida is the daughter of an old friend of mine.'

'What! Do you mean the wife of the man Macpherson, whom Neville mentioned to us?'

Nelson Cole winced.

'Yes—his—his—wife. You are right. I find that I knew her, ages ago, and it has made me feel a great interest in the daughter. And you really mean to take her back? You are not afraid of any more facts cropping up to nip your new-born resolution in the bud?'

'I could be afraid but of one thing, Cole, and that would be any uncertainty respecting her husband's death. You are *sure* that he is dead?'

'I *am* sure. I have made inquiries since I saw you last. The rascal was too well known to be able to pretend to die. He died in the Tombs, cheating justice to the last, as he had ever done.'

'Then I breathe freely, Cole, and Phyllida will be my own again.'

‘But she may have done worse than that, remember,’ said Cole, wishing to test the sincerity of Bernard’s resolution. ‘She was on the stage for a twelvemonth, and I won’t be responsible for anything that happened to her during that period. Suppose she had half a score of lovers,—eh?’

Bernard bit his lip, but answered calmly,—

‘I have determined that all bygones shall be bygones. If Phyllida consents to be my wife, we will begin afresh from the moment of our marriage. She will never find me calling her to account for what took place before I knew her.’

‘Few men are so generous as that,’ said Cole, with a touch of his old sarcasm.

‘Cole,’ replied Bernard earnestly, ‘don’t you think that we men are rather hard, as a rule, upon our women. We allow ourselves every licence, but we call on them to be immaculate. They must not only be modest and single-minded, but they must live as though they were perfectly passionless and

without feeling of any sort. Since I have entered the Church, men have naturally been more shy of bestowing their worldly confidences on me, but when I was a wild young fellow at Oxford, and up to any kind of spree myself, I used to hear and see what married men did when away from their wives, and even then, careless as I was, it shocked me. I used to think how surprised those men would be if, when they went home, their wives (having become aware of their behaviour) refused to receive them; and yet what would *they* have said if the same infidelities had been practised in their absence. They would have called their women by every foul name they could think of, and declare them unfit to be the wives of honest men. And the law would have upheld them. But there is another law than that of man, Cole, and I am trying hard to look at this matter according to the law of God.'

'Well, I believe, for your satisfaction,

that Phyllida was always as good as gold in that respect; but she got tipsy one night—there is no doubt of that. You heard Jack Neville confirm my statement.'

Bernard was gazing before him with dreamy eyes.

'Because she heard that the brute to whom she was tied was locked up, and she would be free from his persecution for two years,' he answered. 'Poor child! How she *must* have suffered to create such a reaction!'

'Oh, that's the way you take it; but isn't there just a chance of her relapsing?'

'Do you think so?' cried Bernard, with sudden energy, springing to his feet. 'Oh no, no—not whilst my arms are round her to save her! My poor darling!—my poor betrayed and outcast Phyllida! If any such terrible harm should follow that one fall to degradation, it will be laid at *his* door, not hers—at the door of *him* with

whom she was forced into an unholy marriage; and I will fight *for* her and *with* her until we have stamped out the last foul memento of that horrible sacrifice. Oh no, Cole, don't think it. She cannot—she *shall* not fall again, with my love standing between her and temptation!’

Nelson Cole seized both his hands and held them as if they were in a vice.

‘My boy!’ he exclaimed—‘my noble-hearted boy! The woman who mates with you should be an angel.’

‘She *shall* be one,’ said Bernard, ‘if the prayers of a lifetime can make her so. Don't tell me any more of her past; let us think only of her future. She is more to me a great deal than the love of my heart; she is a soul that God has put into my hands to save.’

And Bernard looked like a saint as he pronounced the words.

His friend wrung his hands again and sat down; then they both laid their en-

thusiasm aside for a while and became practical.

‘I was only testing the stuff you were made of,’ said Cole, ‘and you have come nobly out of the trial; and now to business, Bernard. Do you know where that poor girl is?’

‘Indeed, I do not. I am here to ask you to help me trace her.’

‘I have been thinking about her a great deal since we parted, and I imagine that old lady, Mrs Penfold, will be better able to find her than ourselves. Didn’t you tell me she was very kind to Phyllida at the time of your marriage?’

‘Very kind, indeed. We were married from her house in Gatehead.’

‘Don’t you think it is probable that Phyllida might again seek a shelter with her cousin at Gatehead?’

‘Perhaps so; but Mrs Penfold is still at Bluemere. She is staying with her sister, Mrs Pinner.’

‘Write to her, then, and ask her to go home, and be ready to receive Phyllida there. Then we will advertise as if from her cousin, begging the girl to return to her protection. I think we shall catch her that way. Of course we could put the matter into the hands of detectives; but the less publicity about these domestic affairs the better.’

Bernard, taking his friend's advice, wrote to Mrs Penfold to Bluemere; but as she had already left Mrs Pinner's, the letter was forwarded to Gatehead, and reached there the very morning that the following lines appeared in the *Standard*, in answer to Mrs Penfold's advertisement:—

‘Phyllida to Gatehead.—I cannot accept your offer. By-and-by, when I am independent, I may see you again, but not now. Many, many thanks, and may God bless you.’

Mrs Penfold cut out the advertisement,

and enclosed it in a letter (which might have been a chapter out of the Lamentations of Jeremiah) to Bernard, who immediately carried it to Nelson Cole.

‘*Independent*, indeed!’ exclaimed the latter. ‘How is such a child to make herself independent in a howling wilderness like *London*, unless it be by returning to the stage, and she will find a difficulty in doing that. She is sure to look in the *Standard* again for another appeal, Bernard. We will insert one that is certain to bring an answer.’

‘But how will that enable us to ascertain her address?’ asked Bernard anxiously. ‘Each day that we are separated now seems like a purgatory to me.’

‘Patience, my son, patience. All things come to him who knows how to wait. This is the sort of thing I should advise you to insert in the paper:—

““*Gatehead to Phyllida.*—*Mr F. has con-*

sulted me about putting the case in the hands of the police. Do you wish him to find out your address or not ?”’

‘And what do you expect her to reply to this?’ asked Bernard ruefully. ‘She will only say “No.” I feel that the shock of discovery has driven her from me for ever.’

‘Bernard, my boy, you’re a very good “cuss,” but I calculate you’ve not been “raised” in the States. This message will be in Phyllida’s hands to-morrow at latest, and she will be in a regular fix about the police. Nothing frightens a woman like the law.’

‘But what’s the good of frightening her, poor darling?’

‘I’m coming to that, my son. The first effect of her fright will be to make her rush to the *Standard* office with an answer to the advertisement. She will write to beg Mrs Penfold to prevent her from seeing *you*.’

. ‘Well—’

‘Well, I guess I shall have my eye on that office all the day, and when she appears to insert her advertisement, I shall drop down upon her—sharp.’

‘Oh, Cole, to-morrow—actually *to-morrow*! Is it possible that to-morrow I shall hold her in my arms again?’

‘*Possible*, but only possible. Suppose she refuses to accompany me home?’

‘Surely she will not refuse when she hears how we long to have her back again.’

‘Don’t know. Women are fickle cattle to shoe behind. But if she accompanies me here, she may refuse to see *you*.’

‘Oh no, no. She loves me, Cole, believe me. She must yearn for me as much as I do for her.’

‘Good; but then there is another risk of failure—so don’t be too sanguine. She may not go to the office herself, but send a messenger.’

‘And in that case, what *shall* we do?’ asked Bernard mournfully.

‘In that case, my chum, we must try the effect of another advertisement. But let us see what to-morrow will bring forth first.’

The two men passed that evening together with a certain degree of cheerfulness, but Bernard was not too much absorbed in his own troubles, to observe that Nelson Cole looked forward to the morrow with almost as much anxiety as himself. It was with difficulty when the morning arrived that he could let him start on his quest alone—he was so sure that if he stood on the opposite side of the way, or up the next street, or under a door-way—that Phyllida would not perceive him until it was too late to make her escape. But Nelson Cole would not hear of his accompanying him, and made him promise into the bargain to keep to his own rooms in the hotel, until he was invited to enter those of his friend. And so the unfortunate parson, left behind in that state of mind

when it is quite impossible to fix the attention upon anything, threw books and papers consecutively to one side, and ended by casting himself, face downwards, upon the bed whilst he worked up his brain to a pitch of madness, by reviewing all the happiest scenes he had passed through with Phyllida, and trying to realise what would become of him if they never occurred again.

Meanwhile Nelson Cole took up his station opposite the office of the *Standard* paper, and watched carefully all who went in or came out. He felt more certain of success than he had confided to Bernard, for several reasons of his own. In the first place, he argued that when women are very anxious about a thing, they always like to do it themselves—they will not believe that any one else can do it so well ; and secondly, Phyllida was a stranger in London, and not aware perhaps of how easily an advertisement can be sent, with a few stamps, through the post ; and thirdly, she was not likely to

be in a position to command the services of any one to do the errand for her. So he kept up a steady tramp on the opposite pavement with his keen eye watching the approaches from every quarter. About two o'clock she came, dressed in her serge costume, pale as a sheet, and with dark circles under her eyes, but still Phyllida, and looking so lovely that every man's head turned to gaze after her as she passed. She came on fearlessly, though evidently labouring under the deepest depression. But she had no idea that any one in that vast crowd would single her out for notice, and when Nelson Cole, crossing the road, placed his hand upon her arm and said the word 'Nessie,' he frightened her so that she screamed. That name reminded her of all that was most terrible in her young life, and she turned about, half-expecting to see the face of Sandie Macpherson scowling at her, or the ghost of Fernan Cortès at her elbow. And when

she recognised Nelson Cole, she seemed hardly less alarmed.

‘Oh, Mr Cole, why are you here? Why do you call me by that name?’

‘I came here solely to find you, child, and I called you ‘Nessie’ because I knew your mother, and I used to call her so.’

‘You knew my mother, and yet you told *him* of me. Oh, I do not believe it. You are making some pretence in order to do me further harm. Let me go, Mr Cole; pray, let me go. I never wish to see or speak to you again.’

‘Phyllida,’ said Nelson Cole earnestly, ‘will you believe me when I tell you, that I wish now I had been dead before I confessed that you were recognised. But it is too late now for regret. Let me try therefore to make you some amends. You have said that I was kind to you once—’

‘Oh yes, you were indeed,’ she interrupted him gratefully; ‘what should I have done if you had not come to my rescue at

that miserable time in Chicago? Why, I never could have left the city. I could not have come to England—I should not have seen *him*. Ah!—’ and here Phyllida put her hand against her side as though to still a sudden pain.

‘ My poor child, you think after all, perhaps, that *that* did not turn out such a kindness. Well, well, never mind it now. I thought I saw my duty plain before me, but you were a little goose not to take my advice and tell Bernard yourself. But, Nessie—’

‘ Not Nessie, Mr Cole, *pray* not Nessie.’

‘ Phyllida, then, if you prefer it, come back with me to my hotel, Phyllida, and let us talk matters over quietly.’

‘ There is nothing to talk over, sir, and there is nothing to be done. I have disgraced him without remedy, and the sooner he and his friends forget my existence the better.’

‘ But I am of a different opinion. I have

been talking with Jack Neville since I was at Briarwood. Do you know, by the way, that your old friend Jack is in town?’

Phyllida slightly shuddered.

‘No, Mr Cole, I had not heard it before; but I would rather not see him. He will remind me of the past.’

‘I had no intention of proposing it, only I found out from what he told me that I had been acquainted with your mother, Mrs Moss (as she called herself), and you are very like her, Phyllida—very like. I know now what it is in your face that attracted me from the first.’

But to Phyllida it was evidently a matter of complete indifference whether Mr Cole was attracted by her or not. She moved uneasily from his side, trying to elude him.

‘Will you let me pass into the office, Mr Cole? I have business here.’

‘What is your business? To insert an advertisement in the *Standard*?’ Don’t throw away your money, Phyllida; you

must have little enough, because I tell you it will be useless.'

She looked at him in astonishment.

'How can you know what my advertisement is about?'

'I don't know the words of it, but I am sure of the substance. It is to entreat your cousin, Mrs Penfold, not to let Bernard Freshfield put the detectives on your track, and I can help you in that matter better than twenty Mrs Penfolds.'

'How can you do so?' she asked faintly.

'Because Bernard will not act without consulting me, in fact the business will be put into my hands to work as I choose. Now, Phyllida, I will make a compact with you. Come home with me and let us talk quietly over the matter, and I promise Bernard shall not have your address until you give it him yourself. Is it a bargain?'

'Yes, I will go with you,' she said; for she was dying to hear all about her hus-

band, and how he had borne the revelations which had been made to him.

She stood quietly enough by Cole's side until he had hailed a cab and placed her in it; but as soon as they were driving towards his hotel, she startled him by hiding her face upon his arm and bursting into a flood of tears.

'Oh, Mr Cole,' she sobbed, 'I don't bear you any enmity—indeed I don't—for I know it was your duty to tell him; and it was to my shame that he should have been kept in ignorance so long. But my heart is breaking—indeed—indeed it is!'

'Hush, Phyllida! Hush, my child,' he found himself saying, in the most paternal manner, as he smoothed the long tresses which had fallen from under her hat.

'I did not dream I was doing him an injury,' she went on, weeping; 'how should I? I didn't know that *anybody* considered a divorce illegal. And, Mr Cole, I was never really married to that other man; for I ran

away from him the very same day that my father forced me into it, and hid in a digger's hut until Cortés had left the valley. So I believed I was quite—*quite* free—to do as I chose.'

'Yes, yes; I understand it all now,' replied Cole soothingly; 'and so will he, some day. I will take care that he does. But you must try and compose yourself, Phyllida, for here we are, close to my hotel, and you would not like the waiters to see you in this condition.'

She drew herself up then, and dried her tears, and pulled her veil over her face, and walked up to his private sitting-room with a dignity of which he had hardly thought her capable; and Jack Neville's assertion that 'Nessie always looked like a lady' came back to his mind as he watched her.

'And now,' he commenced, when they had seated themselves, 'tell me first what you intend to do.'

‘I am going back to the stage, Mr Cole. I find my style of acting is all the rage in London just now, and I have already had a very favourable interview with one of the managers.’

‘Yes, I suppose you will get an engagement, Stephanie, if it is only for your beauty. But of course, then, you have relinquished all idea of returning to Bernard Freshfield?’

She gave a sudden cry, and put up her hand to her face.

‘Oh, Mr Cole, don’t! You know that he would not take me back.’

‘I am not so sure of it. He is very much attached to you, and I believe he would be ready to condone everything if you wished to return.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t—I couldn’t! He may think so now in the first agony of parting; but he would say differently when we had settled down into a quiet life again. Think what I have done to him—he who is so good,

so pure, so pious, so fond of his mother and sister, so anxious to do honour to his profession. I went amongst them all as his wife; I took all the privileges of a wife, and the respect and esteem. And what has it ended in? That he doesn't believe me to have been free till Cortès died, and that for six months I betrayed him (by my cowardice in not telling the truth) into the commission of a sin for which he must look on me with abhorrence, I—I—who would have died for him,' she continued, with a fresh burst of grief.

'Listen to me, my dear,' replied Cole, 'all that you say is very true, and had you *not* believed yourself to be free, and deceived him into thinking you so, I daresay this would have been an awkward matter to mend. But I have talked with poor Bernard on the subject, and however grieved he may be (and he has been terribly cut up about it), he absolves you from blame in the matter.'

‘He *absolves* me!’ she repeated with surprise. ‘Does that mean he thinks I was right?’

‘Not quite that, Phyllida. He regrets deeply that you were not more open with him, but he does not consider the injury has been so great as to prevent your living together again. Bernard wants you to return to him.’

A gleam of joy shot over her countenance, but it was immediately succeeded by her former gloom.

‘He is wrong,’ she answered, ‘even to wish it. Nothing can unmake me. I was never fit to become one of his family; and on looking back, I think I was mad ever to think of it.’

‘But if your husband desires you to return, it becomes your duty to do so.’

‘He is not my husband,’ replied Phyllida.

‘My dear, I think that question is open to doubt. If your divorce was a legal one, he is at any rate your husband by law.’

‘*My husband by law!*’ she echoed; ‘oh, Mr Cole, you don’t know Bernard if you can speak of him like that; you don’t know what Bernard can make a woman feel a husband to be, if you can name the name in the same breath as *law*. Do you imagine I could endure to know myself to be his wife *by law*, and miss all the holiness and sanctity which made the title sound like a blessing to me every time he uttered it? Do you think I could accept what the law would give me, and know that the esteem and love which he showered on me (but which I had no right to take from him) were dead and gone for ever?’

‘Perhaps not; but supposing they are not dead?’

‘I should bring him to shame all the same. I should cause him to be pitied by his neighbours and avoided by his relations. Fancy a parson with a wife whose antecedents must not be inquired into. Oh,

Mr Cole, do not let him find me out ; persuade him to leave me alone. He shall never be troubled again by so much as the mention of my name, for I will not let people know that we have ever met.'

'I don't think Bernard will consent to that,' replied Cole gravely. He was beginning to fear that the task he had taken on himself would prove a less easy one than he had imagined.

'But he must—he must!' cried Phyllida wildly. 'I will not meet him; I will not speak to him. I have been a curse upon his life, and if my heart breaks under the ordeal, I will separate myself from him for ever; and were I to see him come into this room this very moment, I would— Ah!—'

But at this juncture Phyllida turned, and seeing Bernard himself standing on the threshold, gave a shriek of joy and flew into his arms.

'Hang you, Bernard!' cried Nelson Cole, with affected anger, 'I thought I desired

you to remain in your own rooms until I requested the pleasure of your company here.'

But he might have talked for ever before the lovers would have heard a word of what he said.

'Forgive me, love, forgive me!' Phyllida was crying, as, having slid from Bernard's arms, she fell at his feet, and twisted herself like a snake about his knees; 'I did not know what I was doing; I never thought that I was injuring you; I saw only one thing, and that was my love, which would have led me to die for you if my death could have done you any good. Oh, say you forgive me—you who first taught me that there is forgiveness for the worst of sinners—say that you do not believe that I wilfully deceived you—that you will not curse me for having blighted all your hopes in life?'

'I will say nothing, my Phyllida,' returned Bernard, as he attempted to raise her from the ground, 'until you come to my heart—

to your rightful resting-place—and tell me what you wish from there.'

'Oh, Bernard, I am not worthy.'

'If you are not worthy, no woman is. It is your home, dearest, by the rights of our mutual love, and until you come home, I will not speak to you.'

Then she suffered him to lift her drooping form, and clasp it in his arms, and their lips met, as if there had been no stain between them, and she had been the daughter of a duke instead of a disreputable gold digger, who kept a gaming-table in the Valley of Sacramento.

'You know all—*all*,' she whispered.

'All, dearest, except one thing which I wait to learn from your own lips. There has been an irregularity in our marriage, Phyllida. Will you marry me over again?'

'*Over again?*' she repeated, startled at the idea of so much happiness.

'Yes, over again. You are free now,

by the universal Law of Death—and as a free woman, I offer you my hand. Will you accept it, Phyllida?’

‘Oh, Mr Cole,’ she exclaimed, turning to their mutual friend, ‘tell Bernard this must not be. Tell him of what we were talking before he came in.’

‘Well, my dear, I don’t know of what you *were* talking, unless it was of your determination never to see nor speak to him again. And if you are going to keep your other resolutions as well as you did *that* one, why, I don’t think you require any interference on my part.’

She reddened and was silent.

‘Phyllida,’ said Bernard, ‘we don’t want Nelson Cole nor any one else to settle our affairs for us. You are my wife, darling—I can never regard you in any other light—and if you won’t come back to me, I shall have to walk through life alone, for I certainly should never think myself justified in marrying any one else.’

‘There now, you see,’ interposed Cole, ‘if you don’t marry him, Phyllida, you’ll have another set of sins upon your head, and by your own account you can’t afford that.’

‘But your mother and Laura?’ said Phyllida timidly to Bernard.

‘Laura is only too anxious to see us re-united, darling,—and as for my mother,—well, she *is* my mother, and not my wife.’

‘But the Bluemere people?’ continued the girl with a shudder.

‘I shall not take you back to Blue mere, or at all events not for some time. We will have a holiday first, and enjoy some travelling together.’

‘Come over the duck pond with me,’ said Cole; ‘there’s lots of sight-seeing for you in the States.’

‘Done with you!’ exclaimed Bernard heartily. ‘If Phyllida agrees, so do I. And now, my love, when is this marriage to be?’

‘When you like, dear Bernard.’

‘I should *like* to-day, but as I suppose it’s too late, I like to-morrow. I have a brother parson close at hand to whom I will explain matters, and he will do it as privately for us as possible. You will come with us, Cole?’

‘Oh, yes,’ returned Cole gruffly; ‘as I was the cause of the split, I should like to see the knot tied again, and give the bride away. And don’t you think it would be kind to telegraph the intelligence to Mrs Penfold and ask her and the old captain she writes about to join us at luncheon afterwards.’

‘Oh, yes; let us have cousin Penfold, by all means,’ said Bernard. ‘I owe the old lady another sealskin cloak for the rapidity with which she advertised for my darling.’

‘And now, Phyllida,’ said Nelson Cole, ‘I had better see you home, and Bernard can let you know the time and place for

to - morrow's meeting by this evening's post.'

'Oh, can't she stay the evening, and dine with us?' asked Bernard, in a tone of injury.

'No; she is tired out with all this excitement; she will be much better at home.'

'Let me go with her, then,' replied the other eagerly.

'You will do no such thing; I shall take her myself,' was the curt rejoinder; and Nelson Cole began to hurry Phyllida from the room.

She flung herself once more into her husband's arms, and then turning to Cole, she caught his hand and timidly raised it to her lips.

'How can I ever thank you,' she murmured, 'for bringing me home again?'

'Won't you give him a better one than that, Phyllida?—he deserves it,' said Bernard, laughing.

The girl raised her head, and kissed Cole upon the forehead; and as he felt the touch of her lips, the blood mounted to his face as if he had been a boy.

‘Fancy, a kiss from Agnes’s child making me feel like that!’ he grumbled to himself in a cynical manner, as he hurried after her down to the cab which was waiting to convey them to her home. He was ready to laugh at himself for his weakness, and yet the remembrance of Phyllida’s kiss was with him through his dreams.

The next morning was as bright as the season could contrive to make it, and the three people who went to church so early, and returned to the hotel in time to greet Mrs Penfold and Captain Barclay on their arrival from Gatehead, could not have looked brighter had it been a morning in the leafy June.

‘Not in black *this* time, my dear,’ whispered Mrs Penfold approvingly, when the two gentlemen had taken possession of the

nice, bluff old captain, and she had a moment alone with Phyllida.

‘Oh no, cousin Penfold,’ replied the girl, smiling, as she contemplated her soft grey velvet dress. ‘Dear Bernie telegraphed yesterday for Mrs Garnett to send up some of my things. He said we wouldn’t have any mistake *this* time. Oh! he is so good to me, and after all that I have done. I feel so happy, cousin—just as if it was too much to bear, and I must die.’

‘Oh no, my dear, you mustn’t say that,’ replied Mrs Penfold, who took everything she heard *à pied de la lettre*. ‘Mr Freshfield was good enough to write and tell me all about you, and though I don’t say you ought not to have told us of your former marriage, yet it’s all over now, thank heaven! and certainly no one has a better right to Mr Freshfield than yourself. Ah, all marriages have their twofold aspects, and you have found out the truth already. Well, well,’ and Mrs Penfold sighed in a

mysterious manner, which seemed to say,
'Do ask me a little more about it.'

Phyllida took the hint.

'What is it, dear cousin? *Your* marriage was happy enough, I know, for you have often told me so.'

'Yes, my dear, so long as it lasted,' replied Mrs Penfold, still mysteriously.

'You would like it to come over again?' said Phyllida sympathisingly, and with a happy glance at her Bernard.

'I should indeed, my dear; but what would people say? I shall be fifty-two next birthday, remember.'

'Dear cousin, what *do* you mean?'

'Why, my dear, I thought you would have guessed it, from his interest in you and so forth. Captain Barclay, a thorough gentleman, Royal Navy, you know, Phyllida—none of your merchant services, my dear; but, then, as I tell him, "Captain, what *would* the world say?"'

A light broke in on Phyllida.

‘Is it true? Oh, I *am* glad! Never mind *the world*, cousin Penfold. Think of yourselves, and what your *hearts* say; that is the only thing worth a moment’s consideration. Take a lesson from my Bernard. You see how little he cares for the world; and he is so good—so perfect. And a true marriage is such a holy thing. Oh, I think you will be very happy with the dear old captain, and I am sure that he is nice.’

‘Ah, he *is* that, my dear—essentially nice, and has become so used to my ways that he cannot eat his dinner unless I cook it, nor sleep at night unless I make his bed. So I hope I shall make him comfortable in his last days; and our little incomes put together will enable us to keep the house entirely for ourselves. I shall not dare tell my sister Charlotte until it is all over; but I felt I should like to hear you say, Phyllida, that you consider the plan a good one.’

‘I consider it the very best plan in all the world,’ cried Phyllida heartily; but as she spoke the door was flung open, and before the waiter could announce the coming visitors, she found herself clasped in Laura’s arms.

‘Phyllida, my dear, *dear* sister. My darling Phyllida, have you really come home again?’ exclaimed Laura in an outburst of affection and kisses, as she strained her sister-in-law to her heart.

‘Yes, yes, I am home for ever now,’ returned Phyllida; ‘we have just come back from church. We have been married again this morning;’ and the two girls cried together for joy.

‘But please to explain your presence here,’ said Bernard, when the excitement had somewhat subsided. ‘We are delighted, Laurie, to welcome you and dear old Anderson to our wedding-breakfast, but I confess I should like to understand why you two giddy young creatures are running about

London together, and what brought you up from Bluemere on this particular day?’

‘Why, where are mamma and the Muck-heeps?’ exclaimed Laura suddenly, looking round for them.

‘We have not seen them. Did you expect to meet them here?’ replied her brother.

‘They started for London an hour before we did, that is what made Charlie bring me up to you, Bernard, because we feared—we were not quite sure, that is to say, how you would like the intrusion of strangers at such a time. Where *can* they be? I am astonished they have not yet arrived. They must have mistaken the hotel.’

At the idea of her mother-in-law’s appearance, Phyllida turned pale and crept to her husband’s side. Bernard put his arm firmly round her.

‘Never mind,’ he said cheerfully, ‘we are not going to wait luncheon for them,

I can answer for that, for I ate no breakfast this morning, and am as hungry as a hunter. So, my dear friends, will you take your places—(ah! Charlie, how good it is to see *your* face here, my boy)—and join my heart in its thanksgiving for the very happiest meal I've ever sat down to.'

The waiters, who had been busy spreading the table whilst this conversation was carried on, now announced that all was ready, and the party sat down to luncheon. How merry they were; and yet not so merry perhaps as cheerful, for though Laura blushed and giggled a good deal, remembering the scene that had taken place at Blue Mount that morning, and Mrs Penfold simpered in a matronly way under the attentions of Captain Barclay, Phyllida's sweet face turned paler and paler as the moments went on, and each one brought nearer to her the dreaded advent of Mrs Freshfield; and Bernard also, although he felt brave as a lion in

defence of his young wife, wished heartily that the anticipation of the interview had not spoiled their luncheon. At last, however, as the meal had nearly drawn to a conclusion, it came. A querulous voice was heard approaching by the vast staircases of the hotel that led to their apartments, and Laura and Bernard simultaneously exclaimed, 'My mother!' The waiter in attendance heard them, and threw open the door, and Mrs Freshfield appeared first upon the threshold, transfixed at the scene that met her view.

'What is this?' she exclaimed angrily, as her eyes rapidly took in the presence of Laura and Mr Anderson and the rest of the wedding guests.

'*This, mother,*' replied Bernard, as, holding his wife's hand firmly in his own, he rose to his feet to confront her, 'is my wedding breakfast; Phyllida and I have been married again this morning.'

'*Married again!*' gasped Mrs Fresh-

field, 'and when I have travelled all this distance at *my* age to try and save you from being once more shackled with the chains of ungodliness; when I and my dear saintly friends, the Laird o' Muckheep and his blessed sister, have hastened here at the call of duty to try and snatch you as a brand from the burning, to find you once more in the power of Satan, is indeed too hard.'

'Hadn't you better have some luncheon, now you are here?' replied her son practically.

'Hoot, Mrs Fraich-field,' exclaimed the voice of Miss Janet, somewhere from the background, 'didna I tell ye it was rai-sh to leave Bluemere without the wree-teen dirairc-tions in your han' o' the hoose wheer yon misguided young mon had heeden himsel'. If ye had taken my advice, ye woudna ha' dree-ven my brither an' mysel' round Loon-don for mair than twa hoors whiles ye tried to re-cairl the neem o' the street,

an' ye wood ha' been in time, maybe, to raiss-cue heem fra' the weels o' the evil one.'

'Mother,' said Bernard, 'if you and your friends like to take your places amongst us *as* friends, we shall be glad to see you; but if you have journeyed to town for the express purpose of insulting me and my wife, the sooner you go back to Bluemere the better.'

'Oh, sir,' exclaimed Mrs Freshfield, turning to some one who stood behind her, 'can *you* not say a word in season to my unhappy son?'

'Ay,' replied the voice of the Laird o' Muckheep, 'when I can *see* him, madam, mebbe I shall be tauld the reet thing to say to tooch his hairt; but at this moment, Mrs Fraich-field, it's naething I *can* see but the toop o' your ane boonet.'

'I beg you ten thousand pardons,' said Mrs Freshfield, as she made way for the laird to appear upon the threshold; 'in

my terrible grief and disappointment I could think of nothing but myself.'

But at the sound of the laird's voice, Phyllida had risen suddenly to her feet and clung to her husband, almost convulsively.

'What is it, my darling? What do you fear?' Bernard was saying tenderly, when his mother's saintly friend came to the front.

'See, see!' shrieked Phyllida, as she pointed to him; 'I knew it was he. I recognised him from his voice. There stands *my father*.'

She did not hide her face, but she pressed it close against her husband's breast, whilst her eyes glowed like living coals, and every feature was expressive of the keenest horror.

'*Your father!*' repeated Bernard. But by this time a fearful oath had rung through the room—such an oath as comes from the lips of a man, but seldom in his lifetime—such an oath as the condemned

felon in the dock might level at the one who had been the cause of his standing there, and it had issued from the lips of Nelson Cole.

‘Sandie Macpherson, by all that’s holy!’ he exclaimed as he started to his feet.

The Laird o’ Muckheep turned livid—the sweat started to his forehead, and his limbs shook under him. Miss Janet was the first to come to the rescue.

‘Hoot, mon,’ she cried, ‘ye dinna ken wha ye speak to—Sandie Macpherson, indeed. It’s my brither, the Laird o’ Muckheep, wha stan’s befor ye; a mon wha has spended his life in bringing back lairst sools to the ane foold. What wood ye ha’ in callin’ the laird by sic a neem as that?’

‘The Laird of Muckheep?’ cried Phyllida; ‘it is not true. His name is Macpherson, and he is the greatest enemy I ever had. There stands the man, and let him look me in the eyes and deny it if he dare,

who forced me to marry his colleague Fernan Cortës, for fear I should betray the murder I saw them commit between them.'

At the word '*murder*,' which sends a thrill through every breast, the luncheon party rose to their feet simultaneously, and shrank in horror from the man who stood in their midst.

'Ye boold-faced hizzy,' interposed Miss Janet, 'to ca' the Laird o' Muckheep out o' his ain respected name.'

'I don't know what his own name may be,' continued Phyllida, 'for he has had a dozen names to my knowledge, but he knows that what I say is true. He knows that I saw him hold Norris the Englishman down by the arms, whilst Cortës stabbed him in the back with his bowie-knife, and that when I threatened to expose his villainy, he locked me up in a room until he brought a man to marry me to Cortës, and that he had to hold me himself whilst the vile ceremony was

performed. Answer me, Macpherson,' cried the girl, with eyes of fire, 'Is it not the truth that I am telling now?'

'Phyllida, he is too much of a cur to do you justice,' exclaimed Nelson Cole; 'it is a man alone who ought to deal with him, and it is a man who will bring him to his knees. Do you know *me*, Sandie Macpherson?' he said in a voice of thunder, as he strode up to the quondam gold-digger of Sacramento Valley, and glared in his face, 'Do you know *me* — *Nelson Cole*? Answer that.'

Macpherson glanced round the room once or twice uneasily, and then made a bolt for the door. But Cole had already pinioned his arms from behind.

'No, my friend,' he said, shaking his head over him, 'you don't leave us just yet, not till I've finished with you at all events; and if you attempt any violence I will hand you over at once to the police. I repeat my question, Do you know me?'

‘Of course I know you,’ replied Macpherson sullenly.

‘Of course you know me, and I will tell this company why. Nineteen years ago, ladies and gentlemen, this brute, writhing in my grasp here, who has come to England with a shorn face to profess piety, ran away with my wife, Agnes Summers, whom I had married in St Domingo the year before.’

‘My mother!’ exclaimed Phyllida.

‘Yes, child, your unhappy mother, who appears to have expiated her error by a life of suffering. Thank God she is at rest! but you have still to answer to me, Sandie Macpherson, for the wrong you did her. I have tracked you round and round the States for this alone; I have watched and waited for you in vain; and now that you’ve dropped into my mouth like a ripe plum at the time I least expected it, you needn’t think that I will let you go without the punishment I have thirsted to give you.’

‘ Oh, this must be some dreadful mistake,’ said Mrs Freshfield, sinking into a chair, with her handkerchief to her eyes, ‘ to talk of crime and punishment in connection with a saint like the Laird o’ Muckheep, and one whose whole life has been spent in doing good.’

‘ Ech! but these carles ’ull discover theer mistake before lang, Mrs Fraich-field; an’ it’s a teerible peenalty they’ll ha’ to pee foor layin’ veeolent hans upon the sacred pair-son o’ a Muckheep.’

‘ Oh no, madam, do not flatter yourself with such a false idea,’ said Phyllida. ‘ *Who* should know better than myself what that miserable man is? *I* who have the misfortune to call him “*father*.” He killed my mother by a long course of cruelty and violence. He sacrificed *me*, his only child, to a man as wicked as himself to conceal his own crime.’

‘ You’re no bairn o’ mine,’ interrupted Macpherson with a scowl. ‘ Ay, Mr Cole,

bût ye needna glare at me after sic a fashion. Ye maun do what ye like wi' me noo ; I've had my revenge on ye befoor-hand. Ye didna lose anely your wife by my means, for she brought your bairn along wi' her, and for sixteen years she leaved as my ain dairghter in the Sacramento Valley, and there's many to testify to the truth o' that.'

'*Brute !*' exclaimed Cole, as he nearly shook the life out of him. 'Villain, devil ! Was it not sufficient to rob me of one Agnes at a time ?'

'*Not* his child !' cried Phyllida, in a transport of delight. 'Oh, there may be some chance of my redeeming the past yet. *Not* belong to that vile, wicked man ! Bernard, kiss me. I shall be a better woman than I ever hoped to be.'

'What wood ye be doin' by me ?' demanded Macpherson, as Nelson Cole administered a tremendous kick to his person.

'What would I be doing by you ?' he repeated scornfully. 'Why, I would like to

treat you as you treated her—to take your life from you, drop by drop, and see ydu die by inches in silent, hopeless agony. But you are a brute, and I am a man, and I will not forget that you have restored to me my child.'

'Speer me!' said Macpherson, shivering on his knees.

'Spare you? Did you spare my wife? Have you spared my daughter? For what reason should I spare you?'

'But she wasna' meeried to Cortës—it was no a pair-son that I brought to per-fairm the cereemony. It was joist a tree-ck I played to prevent the gairl fra splee-tin' on us. And noo I ha' tauld ye that, and ane gude tairn desairves anither.'

'Not a parson!' repeated Phyllida, 'not married to Cortës! and I ran away from him the very same day. Oh! Bernard, I am indeed your own. How mercifully I have been preserved for you.'

'I will let you go, then,' said Nelson Cole,

addressing Macpherson, 'but not to pollute this country with your presence. Leave England, and never show your ugly face in it again, or I will make the place too hot to hold you.'

'But ye ha' nae proofs—ye canna hand me ower to the police,' said Macpherson anxiously.

'I can make the country ring with your story though, until you are hounded like a leper from the presence of every honest man. And I will do it, excepting on that one condition. Do you understand me?'

'I do.'

'Go, then, and take your sister with you. We wish no remembrance left behind of the injury you have caused so many here.'

He loosed the creature with a 'parting shake as he spoke, and Miss Janet, taking her cue from her brother's demeanour, slunk after the Laird o' Muckheep from the room. Then there was a silence, broken only by the weeping of Mrs Freshfield—for every one

felt that the next words would be sacred.
And so they rung out, like a clarion peal from
heaven upon the happy air,—

‘Father!’

‘My own, own child.’

And Bernard took his wife and placed her
in the arms of Nelson Cole.

THE END.

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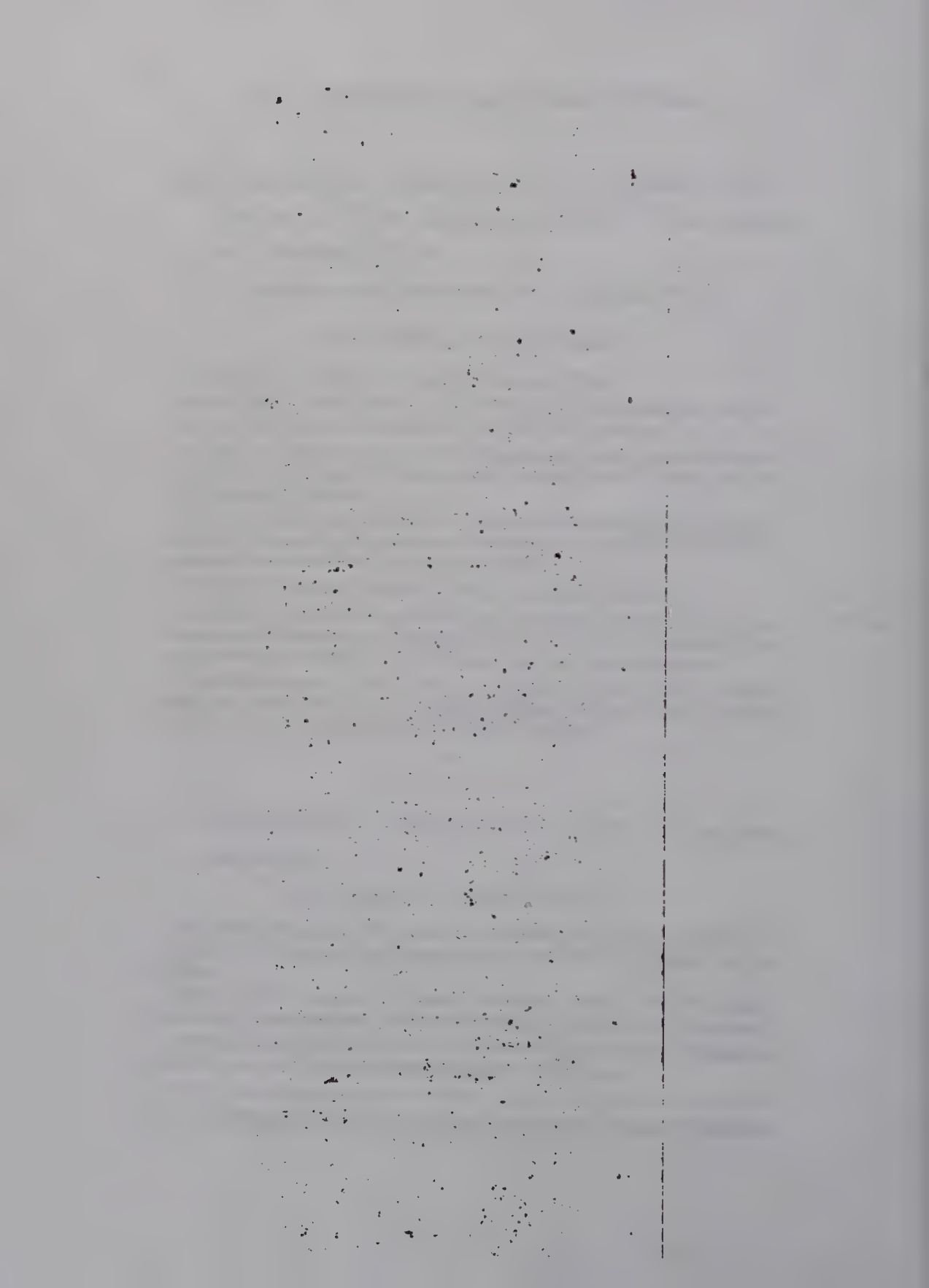
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